

In Praise of Elitism

Charles Murray
Denis Dutton
Claire Fox

with an introduction by Peter Saunders



In Praise of Elitism

In Praise of Elitism

Charles Murray
Denis Dutton
Claire Fox

with an introduction by Peter Saunders

This publication is the edited and revised transcript of the
CIS Big Ideas Forum held on Monday 13 August 2007 at the
Supreme Court of New South Wales, Sydney.

CIS Occasional Paper 107



2008

Published February 2008
by The Centre for Independent Studies Limited
PO Box 92, St Leonards, NSW, 1590
Email: cis@cis.org.au
Website: www.cis.org.au

Views expressed in the publications of the Centre for Independent Studies are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Centre's staff, advisers, directors, or officers.

National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-Publication Data:

In Praise of Elitism / author, Charles Murray;
author, Denis Dutton; author, Claire Fox.

1st ed.

ISBN: 9781864321661 (pbk.)

1. Elite (Social sciences)—Australia.
2. Intellectuals—Australia.

305.552

©2008 The Centre for Independent Studies
Typeset in Adobe Garamond and Frugal Sans

Contents

Introduction

Peter Saunders 1

When elitism is obligatory

Charles Murray 19

The prehistoric origins of anti-elitism

Denis Dutton 27

Anti-elitism, enemy of the common people

Claire Fox 33

Introduction

Peter Saunders

The men of culture are the true apostles of equality. The great men of culture are those who have had a passion for diffusing, for making prevail, for carrying from one end of society to the other, the best knowledge, the best ideas of their time.

Matthew Arnold

This slender volume brings together three papers, which were first presented at the Centre for Independent Studies' *Big Ideas Forum* in Sydney in August 2007. The three speakers were asked to address the theme 'In Praise of Elitism.' In a country that prides itself on its egalitarian values, this was a deliberately provocative choice of title, and it requires some explanation.

The Centre for Independent Studies often describes itself as a 'classical liberal' think tank. The 'classical liberal' designation locates the work of the Centre in a long tradition of western political thought, stretching from John Locke in the seventeenth century, through Adam Smith, David Hume, and the other giants of the Scottish Enlightenment in the eighteenth, to John Stuart Mill in the nineteenth and Friedrich Hayek in our own time. What connects all these writers, and runs as a common thread through their works, is the primacy they accorded to safeguarding individual liberty.

But what is so special about liberty that it should be elevated above other desirable ethical principles such as equality, security, and relief from poverty? Some liberal philosophers answer this question by pointing to the beneficial consequences of liberty—the fact that it tends to promote wealth creation, for example, or that it enables human beings to cooperate without undue use of force. Others appeal more to abstract moral principles—the idea that liberty is a 'natural right' of human beings, or that defence of freedom derives necessarily

from the ‘golden rule’ that we should treat others as we would wish them to treat us.

These are all good arguments, but one of the most compelling arguments in favour of liberty is simply that it is a necessary condition of human happiness.

Happiness and freedom

John Stuart Mill outlined the logic of this argument in the mid-nineteenth century.¹ His starting point was the utilitarian principle that the only unambiguous way to assess whether something is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ is by looking at its impact on human happiness. If something detracts from human happiness it is probably bad; if it adds to it, it is probably good.

To this proposition, Mill added the more controversial claim that human beings are only truly happy when they are able to develop their talents and potentials to the full. He asserted that happiness derives not from the satisfaction of basic wants (sensory contentment), but from the active realisation of one’s individual potential. This is why Mill famously insisted that it is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied, for as a cultivated man, Socrates could experience the ‘higher pleasures’ that come from intellectual stimulation and achievement—pleasures which are unavailable to even the most contented pig. Having once experienced these pleasures, the argument is that no human being would ever willingly exchange them for the mere contentment that comes from having animal instincts satisfied.

The final step in Mill’s argument was to recognise that individuals need to be free if they are to pursue their own life plans and exploit their own peculiar talents to the full. Whether it comes from the imposition of coercive laws, or from the more informal but equally insidious pressure to fall into line with conventional opinion, the requirement that we comply with the way others want us to live is the enemy of true happiness. Provided they do not harm others in the process, individuals must be free to develop their own potential in their own way:

It is not by wearing down into uniformity all that is individual in themselves, but by cultivating it and calling it forth, that human beings become a noble and beautiful object of contemplation ... It is only the cultivation of individuality which produces well-developed human beings.²

Constraints on the pursuit of happiness

At the time when Mill was writing, there were many restrictions on people's freedom that hindered them from fulfilling their full potential, and hence from pursuing true happiness. Some of the most blatant restrictions affected women, who were at that time subject to the authority of their fathers or husbands, denied the right to vote, and, once married, prohibited from owning property. Mill campaigned vigorously against these injustices. He was appalled by laws that could subordinate intelligent and cultivated women to the whims of boorish and ignorant men ('clodhoppers'), and he argued passionately that women must be equal to men to flourish as individuals in their own right:

The legal subordination of one sex to the other is one of the chief hindrances to human improvement ... Equality [of men and women] before the law is the only means of rendering daily life a school of moral cultivation.³

Women were not the only group in nineteenth-century English society who were prevented from pursuing self-fulfilment. Many children born into poor families were also denied the chance to express and realise their potential, not because the law prevented them from doing so, but because they were expected to work from an early age, and their parents were often indifferent to the value education might bring them. Again, Mill was uncompromising, arguing that the law should require all parents to educate their children to a minimum level. He was willing for the state to subsidise school fees for the poor, but consistent with his concern to nurture individuality, he warned against government itself providing the schooling, for 'a general State education is a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another.'⁴

Today, most of the restrictions that Mill identified as limiting people's opportunities have weakened or disappeared. Not only are women regarded as legally equal with men, but discriminating against somebody on the basis of their sex (or their race) is now positively outlawed. Similarly, children not only now enjoy a right to a minimum of ten years of schooling, but this education is offered free of any fees, irrespective of their parents' income, and further and higher education are also now widely available. The welfare state delivers a basic level of income security and healthcare to everybody, so no child need grow up so materially deprived that it cannot benefit from the education on

offer, and competition for jobs is reasonably open, so there is little now stopping bright and motivated people from rising as far as their talent will take them.

There are exceptions, of course. In Australia, Aboriginal children growing up in remote, rural communities are still grossly disadvantaged by a schooling system with educational standards well below those enforced elsewhere in the country.⁵ But for the vast majority of Australians, if you are bright and strongly motivated, there is little nowadays to stop you succeeding.

The coming of meritocracy

Some years ago I analysed social mobility patterns in the UK, drawing from data on a panel of 17,000 children born in the same week in 1958 that has been followed and documented in great detail.⁶ The study made it clear that the barriers that used to block children from poor backgrounds have nearly all collapsed.

This evidence showed that by far the most important determinants of occupational success in the UK today are intellectual ability (as measured by an IQ test taken at age eleven) and motivation (measured by things like truancy rates and teachers' ratings of students' diligence and attitudes to work). Fully half of the explained variance in the occupational status achieved by these British children by their mid-thirties was explained by their IQ alone, and a further seventh was explained by their motivation.

Social advantages and disadvantages (what I call the 'SAD' variables) still have some influence on people's occupational destinies, but it is relatively minor. In the British birth cohort data, parents' social class and parental interest in their child's education each explained just one-tenth of the variance in occupational outcomes, and parental aspirations explained only one thirtieth of it. Moreover, when social factors do play a part, they tend to operate more to prevent low-ability middle-class children from failing than to stop high-ability lower-class children from succeeding. A private-school education, for example, can hinder downward mobility of dull middle-class children, but going to a state school does not stop bright working-class children from succeeding.

Ability and motivation are the two factors that Michael Young identified as the determinants of social placement in a meritocracy.⁷ Together, they account for most of the occupational outcomes that can be

explained in this British study. Therefore, while it is not perfect, for most practical purposes we can say that modern Britain is a ‘meritocracy’—a country where individual ability and effort shape people’s occupational destinies. It would be surprising if Australia were any less open and meritocratic than Britain is.

And yet there is a nagging sense that many children still grow up and live their lives without fully exploiting the talents they have been born with. John Stuart Mill would be dismayed by this, but he would search in vain for the social obstacles that might today be preventing people from fulfilling their potential, for it is not the law that stops them, nor lack of access to education. What’s stopping them is a failure of will, and this reflects a culture that seems increasingly to tolerate, and even celebrate, mediocrity.

Egalitarianism and mediocrity

The problem is no longer that we lack opportunity. It is rather that fewer demands are being made of us. The opportunities are in place, but the expectations have been lowered. Because less is demanded, we settle for less, and our lives are less fulfilled as a consequence.

This acceptance of second best is often justified by an appeal to the language of equality.

The egalitarian belief that Jack is as good as his master used to be a liberating idea, for it encouraged people to strive to succeed, no matter what their origins. The point of life, as Rudyard Kipling wrote, was to push yourself, prove yourself, and overcome your limits:

If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
 To serve your turn long after they are gone,
 And so hold on when there is nothing in you
 Except the Will which says to them: ‘Hold on!’

...

If you can fill the unforgiving minute
 With sixty seconds’ worth of distance run,
 Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it,
 And—which is more—you’ll be a Man, my son!⁸

The point was to succeed, even against the odds. People starting out from humble circumstances were spurred on by the belief that they could triumph over adversity, rather than being encouraged to fall victim to

it. When my father—a working-class boy reared in south London—left school at the age of fourteen to go to work in a local factory, his teacher wrote in his leaving book: ‘Aim high, for though you may not reach the sky, you will most certainly reach the mountaintops.’ Messages like this drew on the legacy of nineteenth-century liberalism and its core belief in the virtue of self-improvement.

But this legacy of self-help and personal responsibility has withered. Today, appeals to egalitarianism pander to the lowest standards rather than demanding the highest. Few teachers today would think of writing what my father’s teacher wrote back in 1938, for nowadays we hesitate to demand things of people lest they fail. We are more comfortable emphasising the disadvantages people face than the opportunities that are available to be seized. Rather than demanding they improve themselves, we indulge people by coming down to their level. Our instinct is to lower the bar rather than help more people vault it.

In our democratic age, egalitarianism has been redefined as mediocrity. We are loath to pass judgement. We want to believe that lazy, ignorant Jack watching TV all day is as good as his master working all hours to get qualified or build a business. So we put the latter’s success down to luck, while the former’s failure is excused as the result of unfairness.

This perverted version of egalitarianism holds that the world owes us a living even if we make no effort to better ourselves. It emphasises our ‘rights’ but has nothing to say about our obligations. It makes excuses for bad behaviour while deriding those who try to maintain high standards. It encourages envy of those who succeed, and it treats failure not as a spur to try harder, but as evidence of victimisation requiring compensation and special treatment. This is not the liberating ethos that used to be associated with egalitarianism. It is rather a recipe for envy, sloth, passivity, and defeatism. It is an ethos that has turned conventional mores on their head, praising what used to be condemned and mocking what used to be applauded.⁹

Praising what used to be condemned, mocking what used to be applauded

One area where we see this in social policy. Charities and government agencies used to draw a clear distinction between responsible people who fell on hard times through no fault of their own and claimants who had brought about their own misfortune through reckless, short-sighted, or

self-destructive behaviour. Today, however, any attempt to discriminate between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' is derided, and any suggestion that people's behaviour might have contributed to their own misfortune is dismissed as 'stigmatising,' 'demonising,' and 'blaming the victim.' The language of social policy professionals today emphasises welfare 'rights' rather than personal responsibility, so everyone gets the same treatment irrespective of their character. The lazy are lumped in with the industrious, the dishonest with the honourable, for the refusal to judge means those who do the right thing must be treated the same as those who resolutely do not.

Education policy provides another example. Perverted egalitarianism makes us reluctant to judge or evaluate people's performances, so we end up lowering standards and reducing quality. There is today a profound sense of discomfort among many educationists about grading students' performances. As Charles Murray suggests in his contribution, there is widespread unwillingness to acknowledge even the existence of intellectual differences between people. This is why fashionable nonsense like 'EQ' (a vague measure of people's ability to 'get on with' other people) gets emphasised while IQ (the ability to reason) is downplayed or even denied.

Educational theorists worry about labelling students as failures, and psychologists alert us to the low 'self-esteem' that might result if students are pushed beyond their intellectual comfort zones. Competition is downplayed while performance of easy tasks attracts exaggerated praise. As Claire Fox suggests in her contribution to this collection:

We do not expose the young to honest criticism, and therefore we deny them the chance to discover what they don't know but could find out, and how they could improve. We deprive them of being encouraged to stand on the shoulders of giants. Instead we tell them that their own untutored insights are special and deserve ovations.

All of this spills over into unsuccessful and sometimes disastrous policies and practices based in egalitarian wishful thinking. The point-blank refusal to accept that some students may lack the ability to benefit from an extended education, for example, has driven the expansion of courses for which increasing numbers of students are ill-suited. Three

quarters of young Australians now remain at school to year 12, yet nobody asks whether three quarters of the population (representing an IQ spread starting with a score as low as 90) can really benefit from an additional two years of schooling. Research shows that less able students would do better to leave school and get a job after year 10 rather than stay on for another two years, but this is not a message politicians and educators are ready to hear.¹⁰

Further up the educational ladder, students of average ability or less are now being crammed into academic courses in universities, with the inevitable consequence that standards are being diluted and higher qualifications are becoming devalued.¹¹ As Charles Murray suggests, 'Traditionally and properly understood, a four-year college education teaches advanced analytic skills and information at a level that exceeds most people's intellectual capacity.' He estimates that 15%, or at most 20%, of people are capable of benefiting from a rigorous university education. He concludes that too many people today are going to college, but nobody wants to admit it.

Non-judgementalism blights our personal lives as well. We know, for example, that children born to single parents fare far worse on average on a wide range of indicators than those born to stable, married couples, even after socioeconomic differences are taken into account.¹² They tend to have lower birth weights, suffer higher infant mortality rates, are much more at risk of physical and sexual abuse, perform worse at school, are more likely to get into trouble with the law, and are more prone to unemployment as adults. But psychologists, politicians, journalists and other opinion leaders are generally loath to admit any of this in public lest they give offence.

Nobody wants to tell separating parents it may be better for their children if they stay together, even though in most cases this is true, for this would force them to confront uncomfortable truths that they would rather deny.¹³ Similarly, nobody wants to criticise young women for having children without a committed male partner to help support them, for making judgements on other people's behaviour is something none of us is willing to do any more. And what used to be plain commonsense advice is now unutterable in polite company. So everyone stays quiet and keeps their head down lest they be accused of being intolerant or bigoted or uncaring. And in the continuing silence, the damage continues to build, generation after generation.

Entertain, inform, educate?

Television is a major factor in the emergence and perpetuation of this non-judgemental culture of mediocrity. Chasing a mass audience in an age of multiple channels has led inevitably to cheap and dumbed-down content as producers with an eye on the ratings go for the lowest common denominator with coverage of Paris Hilton's drug habit, Shane Warne's love life, or an exposed penis on *Big Brother*. As Claire Fox suggests, TV producers 'appear to have stopped trying to build audiences for challenging, difficult, or enlightening output ... like the elite in other spheres, having lost faith in their own mission they have also lost faith in us, the public, and our capacity to be stretched.'

David Puttnam, the director of *Chariots of Fire* and deputy chairman of Channel Four in the UK, recently admitted, 'I am not proud of *Big Brother* but it accounts for 15% of our total revenue.'¹⁴ The same calculations lead to third-rate 'celebrities' being shut away on tropical islands and given humiliating tasks to perform during peak-time viewing; to sad, blighted members of an ill-educated American underclass shouting and swearing at each other across television studios as their infidelities are exposed in front of a live audience; and to boorish drunks driving recklessly on police videos which are then beamed into the nation's living rooms. An imported US comedy, *Californication*, recently featured a dream sequence in which a nun fellated a man in church in front of a giant crucifix. It was the fourth-most-watched show the day it premiered, attracting almost a million viewers.¹⁵ Crude and vulgar language, casual references to drug-taking and other illegal activities, and shameless accounts of sexual exploits in public toilets or in cars with prostitutes are routinely now indulged with a wry smile by suave chat-show hosts intent on showing how 'broad-minded' and cosmopolitan they are.¹⁶ Meanwhile, youngsters exchange videos of fights and sexual assaults recorded on mobile phones, and hardcore pornography dominates the internet.

All of this represents a gross and depressing antithesis to the hopes and expectations of earlier generations. Contrast *Big Brother* with the aspiration expressed by the first chairman of the BBC, Lord Reith, that broadcasting should 'inform, educate and entertain.' Compare *Californication* with Matthew Arnold's impassioned plea for an educated

citizenry to be raised in a culture cherishing the ‘sweetness’ of moral righteousness and the ‘light’ of intellectual challenge and truth.¹⁷ In *The Tears of the Giraffe*, the character J. L. B. Matekoni writes a letter to Botswana’s Minister of Education, recommending moral instruction for the country’s youth, but decides not to send it. He reflects:

That was the difficulty. If you made any point about behaviour these days, you sounded old-fashioned and pompous. The only way to sound modern, it appeared, was to say that people could do whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted, and no matter what anybody else might think. That was the modern way of thinking.¹⁸

Prizing ignorance

In the nineteenth century, Mill warned against weighing the opinions of ill-informed or ill-educated people equally with those of the best-informed people. In public affairs, the ill-considered thoughts of the ignorant should not be treated as equivalent to the ideas of the more enlightened, for this would send a message that ignorance is valued equally with wisdom:

It is not useful, but hurtful, that the constitution of the country should declare ignorance to be entitled to as much political power as knowledge.¹⁹

While Mill believed in a universal franchise, he was also concerned to defend reason against ignorance and enlightenment against barbarism. His proposed solution was a system of ‘plural voting’ in which people of higher intellect, or those who had taken the trouble to develop greater knowledge and understanding of the world, would get more votes. He suggested, for example, that people who exercise responsibility in the world of work might be given more votes than those who did not, or that the well-educated might have more votes than the ill-educated. He also proposed that voluntary examinations might be instituted to which people seeking additional votes could subject themselves. Not only would such a system favour informed opinion over uninformed, it would also help nurture a culture of self-improvement by emphasising the value the society attaches to learning and the attainment of wisdom.

An idea like this would be howled down today, of course, although it is interesting to reflect that foreigners seeking Australian citizenship (and hence the right to vote in Australian elections) will henceforth be required to pass a simple test before citizenship is conferred. When it comes to people who are born here, however, we are committed to the principle that those who know nothing about public affairs should wield just as much electoral influence as those who do. Indeed, not only do we insist that everyone over the age of eighteen should have one (equal) vote, but we also force those who have no interest or knowledge of civic affairs to participate in elections, threatening them with being fined if they abstain. This sends out the message that, far from penalising ignorance, we prize it.

Compulsory voting is sometimes defended on the grounds that it prompts the ignorant to take an interest in the affairs of their country, and therefore helps educate them, but research on voting behaviour shows this is wishful thinking. Most of us are fairly ignorant about how our political system works, but people who say they would not vote if they were not required by law to do so are generally even less knowledgeable than those who say they would.²⁰ By forcing everyone to vote, we are therefore multiplying the impact of the people who have the least interest or understanding of politics and government, and this can have significant consequences. The 1999 referendum on whether Australia should become a republic, for example, would not only have been won if voting had been voluntary, but the result was determined by the votes of people who had the least knowledge about the existing system, the least understanding of the proposed changes, and who were least concerned about the outcome.²¹

Just as worrying as our insistence on flattering the politically illiterate by demanding that they vote is our faith that almost anybody is competent to sit on a jury and to draw rational conclusions about other people's guilt and innocence. We like to assume that juries come to their decisions by applying analytical logic and evaluating complex factual evidence, yet these skills require levels of intelligence and diligence many jurors don't even approach.

The jury is an island of irrationality at the heart of our rational legal system. Max Weber traced the roots of the jury to the use of oracles and trial by ordeal, for like them, trial by jury generates a 'revealed

truth' without ever having to rationally defend the decision reached.²² We might just as well toss a coin.

In the days before universal suffrage, when juries were selected entirely from members of the business and propertied classes, those empanelled were at least educated to a level likely to be adequate to the task they had to perform. Nowadays, however, the most educated people are often either exempted from jury service, or are vetoed by defence counsel for fear they may be too intelligent.²³ The result is that the least competent get selected to do the job, which is why guilty defendants generally prefer to take their chance in front of a jury rather than putting their fate in the hands of a competent magistrate or judge.

A recent study conducted by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research began by asking members of twenty-five different juries to state the outcome of the trials in which they had just participated. In only a quarter of cases did every juror report the same, correct, verdict. In one trial, no fewer than four jurors reported that the accused had been found guilty on at least one charge when he had in fact been acquitted on all charges. In another, ten jurors between them managed to report three different versions of the outcome (guilty, not guilty, and hung jury). In some cases, jurors said the judge had directed them to return a not guilty verdict when he had done no such thing (they simply misunderstood his summing up). The authors of this depressing research concluded, 'It seems that some jurors were confused, unclear or uncertain about the verdict.'²⁴ If they don't even know what verdict they had just agreed upon, one wonders how much they understood of the details of the case they had been trying.

But to acknowledge these problems would be to violate the egalitarian principle that everyone is as competent as everyone else, and that nobody's opinion is worth any more than anybody else's. So we go on pretending all jurors are competent and diligent in determining the outcomes of trials, just as we pretend all voters know what they are doing in the polling booth. In reality, trials, like elections, are being determined by people who do not have a clue what is going on.

Patronising politics

In the United States, researchers recently analysed the vocabulary used by candidates in presidential debates, grading it on the Flesch-Kincaid

Grade Level scale, which is used to classify children's reading books to different age standards. They found that in 2000, George W. Bush spoke in language appropriate to sixth-grade students (those aged eleven to twelve), while Gore used a vocabulary pitched just one grade higher. Similarly, in their 1992 campaigns for the presidency, George Bush Sr and Ross Perot both limited themselves to sixth-grade vocabularies, while Clinton took a risk by including words suitable for seventh-grade students.

Going back to 1960, however, it seems candidates for the most powerful office in the world expected voters to be able to cope with something a little more challenging than primary-school language. In that year's debate, both Kennedy and Nixon used vocabulary appropriate to tenth-graders (fifteen- to sixteen-year-olds). They in turn were put in the shade by the Lincoln–Douglas debate of 1858. Back then, Abraham Lincoln addressed voters using words appropriate to an eleventh-grade education, and his opponent spoke in the language of twelfth-grade students.²⁵

So, in the 150 years since the Gettysburg Address, the vocabulary through which America's leaders choose to address their people has fallen by six full years of schooling.

The same is almost certainly true here too. Political arguments and ideas are necessarily often detailed, difficult, and complex. It takes effort to consider and evaluate them, to inform yourself of the issues, to weigh the competing options, and to come to a reasoned conclusion. Most voters don't bother—political scientists have known for a long time that the 'rational issue voter' is a myth, and that most people vote according to habit, to vague party images, or to the personalities of the party leaders as they come across in ten-second sound bites on the TV news.²⁶

Politicians know this, which is why they talk down to us like children, assuming (rightly in many cases) that they can buy our votes with handouts rather than winning our support with the power of their arguments. At election time, particular constituencies are unashamedly and blatantly targeted with promises of largesse—a hospital here, a highway improvement there—and appeals to the electorate at large are pitched in terms of how much money they can expect to gain if they return this party to power rather than that one. Politicians don't need a complex vocabulary to bribe voters in this way, any more than Father

Christmas needs higher than a sixth-grade vocabulary when he hands out freebies to children peering into his sack.

Not only do politicians use increasingly simple, dumbed-down language to address us, they also think they have to appeal to us by denying they are any wiser or cleverer than we are. There is, of course, a long and honourable tradition in Australian political culture of deflating the pretensions of those who would lead us. In his contribution, Denis Dutton links this tall-poppy-slaying to the ‘reverse dominance hierarchies’ found in many human groups throughout our evolutionary history. He says we are programmed to follow talented and successful leaders, but also to resent them if we sense they are drifting too far from our needs and interests.

Be that as it may, it is clearly in our interest as voters that those we elect to high public office have the superior intelligence and experience needed to make difficult decisions wisely on behalf of the whole nation. Yet our leaders today seem intent on assuring us that they are no smarter than we are.

Before he got the Labor leadership, for example, commentators speculated that Kevin Rudd was ‘too clever’ to be elected, but larking around on Friday mornings with Mel and Kochie on the Channel Seven *Sunrise* program is widely acknowledged to have helped him overcome that obstacle.²⁷ Not to be outdone, then Prime Minister Howard assured John Laws’ talkback radio listeners that he was ‘not clever,’ despite what his opponents were claiming about him:

They keep saying I am clever. Now they don’t really mean that, it’s not meant to be complimentary, but I tell you what, John, I can’t be all that clever because I’m, you know, behind in the polls. If I were really as clever as they are suggesting that wouldn’t be the case.²⁸

It seems the worst thing for a politician in an age of egalitarian mediocrity is to appear clever or well-educated. Consider the following exchange from Channel Nine’s *Today* program. After a speech in Parliament in which he noted that those who sup with the devil should use a long spoon, then Health Minister Tony Abbott was challenged by host Karl Stefanovic, who had evidently never come across this common proverb before. Rather than enlighten his host and the viewing public, Abbott preferred to ridicule his own erudition:

Karl Stefanovic: ‘Supping with the devil,’ such an unusual phrase. Where did you pull that one from?

Tony Abbott: Look, I guess it just came to me! [laughs]
After ferocious cross-examination by people like yourself—
must have been my recent biblical studies [laughs].

Inform and educate as well as entertain? Spread sweetness and light?? Enlighten people so they can appreciate the higher pleasures??? Not any more. As Claire Fox suggests, our political leaders are patronising, constantly trying to suck up to us by pretending to ‘come down’ to the level they think we are at. This is not egalitarianism—it is a calculated insult.

This (elite) sporting life

There is, however, one area of modern life where we still celebrate excellence, demand high standards, insist on the virtues of competition, and devote ourselves to self-improvement. It is sport. Here is the opening paragraph from the home page of the Australian Institute of Sport:

The Australian Institute of Sport leads the development of *elite* sport and is widely acknowledged in Australia and internationally as a world best practice model for *elite* athlete development. The AIS is a pre-eminent *elite* sports training institution in Australia with world class facilities and support services. (emphasis added)

The Institute unashamedly uses the word *elite* three times in its opening paragraph. It tells us it is only concerned with the highest levels of sporting competition, and it leaves us in no doubt that that this is no place for those of modest talent. The institute deals only with the very best athletes, and nobody, apparently, has any problem with that.

Now search the websites of our leading universities. Our top-ranked university is the Australian National University (ANU).²⁹ This is how the ANU describes itself on its web site:

The ANU is one of the world’s foremost research universities. Distinguished by its relentless pursuit of excellence, ANU attracts leading academics and outstanding students from Australia and around the world.

Certainly these are proud claims to excellence—ANU claims to have a strong research profile and to attract some of the best staff and students. But compared with the Institute of Sport, there is a marked reluctance to use the E-word. If you do a keyword search for *elite* on the ANU website, almost the only pages where you will find the word used are on its sporting pages (the top match is to a link telling us that ‘The ANU is an Elite Athlete Friendly University’).

Our second-ranked university, Melbourne, is even more coy:

Established in 1853, the University of Melbourne is a public-spirited institution that makes distinctive contributions to society in research, teaching and knowledge transfer.

A public-spirited institution? Distinctive contributions? Clearly, we are happy to praise elitism in sport, but not in areas of intellectual or cultural life, which arguably matter much more. John Stuart Mill must be spinning in his grave.

Endnotes

- ¹ The key essay is *On Liberty* (1859) but also relevant to this discussion are the essays on *Utilitarianism* (1861) and *The Subjection of Women* (1869). All are collected in John Gray (ed.), *John Stuart Mill: On Liberty, and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).
- ² Mill, *On Liberty*, 70.
- ³ Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, 471.
- ⁴ Mill, *On Liberty*, 17.
- ⁵ Helen Hughes, *Lands of Shame* (Sydney: The Centre for Independent Studies, 2007).
- ⁶ Peter Saunders, *Unequal But Fair?* (London: Institute of Economic Affairs, 1996).
- ⁷ Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1958).
- ⁸ Rudyard Kipling, ‘If,’ in *The Collected Poems of Rudyard Kipling* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2001), 605.
- ⁹ See Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The De-moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).
- ¹⁰ Gary Marks, in ‘Issues in the School-to-work Transition,’ *Journal of Sociology* 41 (2005), 363–85, finds no benefit from extended schooling for those who do not then go on to university. The Productivity Commission finds that students of low IQ who stay at school beyond year 10 actually reduce their employability by 3 percentage points as well as damaging their earning potential. Ralph Latimore,

- Men Not At Work*, Productivity Commission staff working paper (January 2007), chapter 9.
- ¹¹ Bob Birrell, for example, recently reported that one third of overseas students completing tertiary courses in Australian universities scored below band 6 ('competent') in English language proficiency, yet they passed their final degrees: 'Implications of Low English Standards Among Overseas Students at Australian Universities,' *People and Place* 14 (2006), 53.
- ¹² For a review of the evidence, see Barry Maley, *Family & Marriage in Australia* (Sydney: The Centre for Independent Studies, 2001).
- ¹³ Paul Amato, 'Good Enough Marriages: Parental Discord, Divorce, and Children's Well-being,' *Virginia Journal of Social Policy & the Law* 9 (2002), 71–94.
- ¹⁴ Quoted in Peter Wilson, 'Banishing the Banal,' *The Weekend Australian* (23–24 June 2007). In the same article, Paul McCartney accused *Big Brother* of lionising people whose only discernible talents were mental instability and breast implants. 'I'm against the celebration of mediocrity,' he complained.
- ¹⁵ Based on preliminary OzTAM results for 3 September 2007.
- ¹⁶ Compare Michael Parkinson's interviews from twenty or thirty years ago with those done more recently with 'celebrities' like George Michael or Ozzy and Sharon Osbourne. On one show, Sharon Osbourne told the tale of a drunken meal in an Eastern European restaurant where her husband stripped and placed his penis in his host's drink. Parkinson joined his guests and audience in roaring with laughter at a story that thirty years ago would certainly not have been broadcast and would probably have left a studio audience appalled.
- ¹⁷ 'The sweetness and light of the few must be imperfect until the raw and unkindled masses of humanity are touched with sweetness and light. If I have not shrunk from saying that we must work for sweetness and light, so neither have I shrunk from saying that we must have a broad basis, must have sweetness and light for as many as possible ... Only it must be real thought and real beauty; real sweetness and real light. Plenty of people will try to give the masses, as they call them, an intellectual food prepared and adapted in the way they think proper for the actual condition of the masses ... But culture works differently. It does not try to teach down to the level of inferior classes ... It seeks to do away with classes; to make all live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light ... The men of culture are the true apostles of equality. The great men of culture are those who have had a passion for diffusing, for making prevail, for carrying from one end of society to the other, the best knowledge, the best ideas of their time; who have laboured to divest knowledge of all that was harsh, uncouth, difficult, abstract, professional, exclusive; to humanise it, to make it efficient outside the clique of the cultivated and learned, yet still remaining the best knowledge and thought of the time, and a true source, therefore, of sweetness and light.' Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, (1869; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 52–53.
- ¹⁸ Alexander McCall Smith, *Tears of the Giraffe* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2000), 37.
- ¹⁹ Mill, *Representative Government*, 340.
- ²⁰ At the 2004 federal election, the median voter could answer correctly only two

- out of seven factual questions about the Australian constitution. Ian McAllister, 'Civic Education and Political Knowledge in Australia,' *Australian Journal of Political Science* 33, 7–23. Those who would not vote if they were not compelled to were less educated and less interested. Nearly one third of them did not know Australia became a federation in 1901; seven out of ten did not know the Senate was elected by proportional representation.
- ²¹ Ian McAllister, 'Elections Without Cues: The 1999 Australian Republic Referendum,' *Australian Journal of Political Science* 36, 247–69.
- ²² 'The jury took the place of the oracle, and indeed it resembles it inasmuch as it does not indicate rational grounds for its decision.' Max Weber, *Economy & Society* (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968), 762.
- ²³ Justice James Wood, head of the NSW Law Reform Commission, says: 'The impression that one has is that people who are serving, particularly in longer cases, are students, or unemployed people, or people who've retired.' *AAP* (13 December 2006). WA District Court judge Valerie French writes, 'Prospective jurors with management experience, small business operators, accountants and teachers are routinely excluded. The perceived wisdom appears to be that they may know too much, be too conservative or too protective of property rights. This can leave a pool of people who appear to be the unemployed, the disinterested [*sic*] or—more dangerously—the very resentful at being press ganged into service.' 'Juries: A Central Pillar or an Obstacle to a Fair and Timely Criminal Justice System?' *Reform* 90 (Winter 2007), 40–42.
- ²⁴ Judy Cashmore and Lily Trimboli, 'Child Sexual Assault Trials: A Survey of Juror Perceptions,' NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, *Crime & Justice Bulletin* 102 (September 2006), 12.
- ²⁵ Diane Ravitch, 'Dumbing Down the Public: Why it Matters,' *The Daily Report*, (Hoover Institution: 15 January 2001), <http://www.hoover.org/pubaffairs/dailyreport/archive/2866856.html>.
- ²⁶ For a review of the evidence on voting behaviour, see John Dearlove and Peter Saunders, *Introduction to British Politics*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Polity Press, 2000), chapter 4.
- ²⁷ David Koch, co-presenter of the program and an accomplished author and businessman, is himself also guilty of hiding his intelligence behind a facade of banality and blandness. Programs like *Sunrise* patronise their viewers, never dwelling for more than a few minutes on any serious topic, and peppering their output with jokes, trivia, and audience feedback. With Channel Nine's *Today* following a similar format, and the ABC running children's cartoons in the mornings, there is no serious news program on free-to-air breakfast television in Australia.
- ²⁸ John Howard, interview with John Laws on Sydney radio station 2UE (6 August 2007).
- ²⁹ This is according to the *Times Higher Education Supplement* and Quacquarelli Symonds (THES-QS) World University Rankings for 2007. "THES-QS World University Rankings 2007—Top 400 Universities," http://www.topuniversities.com/worlduniversityrankings/results/2007/overall_rankings/top_400_universities/.

Charles Murray

When elitism is obligatory

I do not come here to praise elitism, but neither can I come to bury it. Here is the reality that those of us in the United States need to come to grips with and, from what I am told, that Australia needs to come to grips with: every society in the world from the beginning of time to the end of human existence has been, and will be, run by an elite. The only question is whether that elite rules by coercion, by hereditary right, or by positions obtained through free and non-violent competition. Australia and the United States are about as close as human societies have ever come to the latter—what is sometimes called a meritocracy. Neither country is perfect, but, in both countries, the economic and social barriers that used to stand in the way of talent have been largely dismantled.

An elite runs the United States. An elite runs Australia. Always will. That's the reality. Now, here's the problem: when it comes to education, both countries are in denial. Is there a problem with growing income inequality? The solution is to have everybody go to college, since people make more money if they have a college degree. Are too many young people committing crimes or doing drugs? We need more and better education for them. You name the problem, and I will show you a stack of claims that too little education is to blame or that more education is the answer.

One word is missing from these discussions: ability—specifically, intellectual ability. Hardly anyone will admit it, but education's role in causing or solving any problem cannot be evaluated without considering the underlying intellectual ability of the people being educated. By intellectual ability, I mean more specifically linguistic ability, logical-mathematical ability, and certain kinds of spatial ability—the abilities that permit people to succeed in academic subjects. To save time, I'm

going to use the word ‘intelligence’ to stand for this ability, knowing that it is a simplified label for a more complicated concept.

Tonight, I want to make the case for three simple truths about the mediating role of intelligence, which should bear on the way we think about education and the future of both of our nations.

The first simple truth: Half of all children are below average in intelligence

It’s really pretty hard to argue with, when you think about it. Furthermore, our ability to improve the academic accomplishment of students in the lower half of the distribution of intelligence is severely limited. It is a matter of ceilings.

Suppose a girl in the ninety-ninth percentile of intelligence is getting a C in English. She is underachieving, and someone who sets out to raise her performance might be able to get a spectacular result.

Now suppose the boy sitting behind her is getting a D, but his intelligence is at the forty-ninth percentile. We can hope to raise his grade, but teaching him more words or drilling him on the parts of speech will not open up new vistas for him. It is not within his power to learn to follow an exposition written beyond a limited level of complexity, any more than it is within my power to follow a proof in the *American Journal of Mathematics*. In both cases, the problem is not that we have not been taught enough, but that we are not smart enough.

Now take the girl sitting across the aisle who is getting an F. She is at the twentieth percentile of intelligence. Even if she is taught to read every bit as well as her intelligence permits, she still will be able to comprehend only simple written material. It is good that she becomes functionally literate, and it will affect the range of jobs she can hold. But still she will be confined to jobs that require minimal reading skills. She is just not smart enough to do more than that.

How about raising intelligence? It would be nice if we knew how, but we do not. It has been shown that some intensive interventions temporarily raise IQ scores by amounts ranging up to seven or eight points—not enough to make a major difference. Worse yet, the increases even in these rare success stories fade to insignificance within a few years after the intervention. There are no exceptions to this story. We have claims to the contrary—in the US, a woman named Marva Collins has been saying for twenty-five years that she can take a classroom of

inner-city students and have them reading Shakespeare and Plato within a few months. But in all those twenty-five years, she has never allowed researchers to examine data that might support those claims.

There is no reason to believe that raising intelligence significantly and permanently is a current policy option, no matter how much money we are willing to spend.

This is not to say that American public schools cannot be improved. Many of them, especially in large cities, are dreadful. But even the best schools, under the best conditions, cannot repeal the limits on achievement set by limits on intelligence.

The second simple truth: Too many people are going to college

Now consider people whose intelligence puts them in the upper half of the distribution. Just being in that category is not enough for genuine college work.

Begin with those barely into the top half. To have average intelligence means that a tough high-school course pushes you about as far as your academic talents will take you. If you are average in math ability, you may struggle with algebra and would probably fail a calculus course. If you are average in verbal skills, you often misinterpret complex text and make errors in logic.

These are not devastating shortcomings. You are smart enough to engage competently, even superbly, in any of hundreds of occupations. You can acquire more knowledge if it is presented in a format commensurate with your intellectual skills. But a genuine college education in the arts and sciences begins where your skills leave off.

In engineering and most of the natural sciences, the demarcation between secondary school material and college-level material is brutally obvious. If you cannot handle the math, you cannot pass the courses. In the humanities and social sciences, the demarcation is fuzzier. It is possible for someone with average intelligence to sit through lectures in Economics 1, read the textbook, and write answers in an examination book. But students who cannot follow complex arguments accurately are not really learning economics. They are taking away a mishmash of half-understood information and outright misunderstandings that probably leave them under the illusion that they know something they do not. (A depressing research literature documents one's inability to recognise one's own incompetence.) Traditionally and properly understood, a four-year

college education teaches advanced analytic skills and information at a level that exceeds most people's intellectual capacity.

There is no magic point at which a genuine college-level education becomes an option, but anything below the eightieth percentile is problematic. If you want to do well, you should have intellectual ability in the top 15%. Put another way, it makes sense for only about 15% of the population—20%, if one stretches it—to get a college education. And yet, in the United States, more than 45% of recent high-school graduates enrol in four-year colleges.

No data that I have been able to find tell us what proportion of those students really want four years of college-level courses, but it is safe to say that large numbers are in college to improve their chances of making a good living. What they really need is vocational training. But nobody will say so, because vocational training is viewed as second class; college is first class.

Large numbers of those who are intellectually qualified for college also do not yearn for four years of college-level courses. They go to college because their parents are paying for it and college is what children of their social class are supposed to do after they finish high school. They may have the ability to understand the material in Economics 1, but they do not want to. They, too, need to learn to make a living—and would do better in vocational training.

Combine those who are unqualified with those who are qualified but uninterested, and some large proportion of students on today's college campuses—probably a majority of them—are looking for something that the four-year college was not designed to provide. Once there, they create a demand for practical courses taught in undemanding ways. Colleges try to accommodate these new demands. But no practical specialty requires four years of classwork—not even physicians get four years of medical classwork—and the best way to teach those specialties is not through a residential institution with the staff and infrastructure of a college. It amounts to a system that tries to turn out televisions on an assembly line that also makes pottery. It can be done, but it is ridiculously inefficient.

Government policy contributes to the problem by making college scholarships and loans too easy to get, but its role is not central. The demand for college is market-driven because a college degree does, in fact, open up access to jobs that are closed to people without one. The fault lies in the false premium that our cultures have put on a college degree.

For a few occupations, a college degree still certifies a qualification. For example, employers appropriately treat a bachelor's degree in engineering as a requirement for hiring engineers. But a bachelor's degree in a field such as sociology, psychology, economics, history, or literature certifies nothing. It is a screening device for employers. The college you got into says a lot about your ability, and that you stuck it out for four years says something about your perseverance. But the degree itself does not qualify the graduate for anything. There are better, faster, and more efficient ways for young people to acquire credentials to provide to employers.

A reality about the job market must eventually begin to affect the valuation of a college education: in the United States, and I bet in Australia as well, the spread of wealth at the top of society has created an explosive increase in the demand for craftsmen. Finding a good lawyer or physician is easy. Finding a good carpenter, painter, electrician, plumber, glazier, or mason—the list goes on and on—is difficult, and it is a seller's market. In the US, journeymen craftsmen routinely make incomes in the top half of the income distribution, while master craftsmen can make six figures. They have work even in a soft economy. Their jobs cannot be outsourced to India. And the craftsman's job provides wonderful intrinsic rewards that come from mastery of a challenging skill that produces tangible results. How many white-collar jobs provide nearly as much satisfaction?

Even if foregoing college becomes economically attractive, the social cachet of a college degree remains. That will erode only when large numbers of high-status, high-income people do not have a college degree and do not care. The information technology industry is in the process of creating that class, with Bill Gates and Steve Jobs as exemplars of people who dropped out of college. It will expand for the most natural of reasons: a college education need be no more important for many high-tech occupations than it is for basketball players or cabinetmakers.

The third simple truth: Our nations' futures depend on the intellectually gifted

I'm going to define 'intellectually gifted' more broadly than usual, to mean everyone with intellectual ability in the top 10%.

In professions screened for intelligence by educational requirements—medicine, engineering, law, the sciences, and academia—the great majority

of people must, by the nature of the selection process, have intellectual ability in the top 10%. Evidence about who enters occupations for which the screening is not directly linked to education indicates that people with intelligence in the top 10% also occupy large proportions of positions in the upper reaches of corporations and the senior ranks of government. People in the top 10% of intelligence produce most of the books and newspaper articles we read and the television programs and movies we watch. They are the people in the laboratories and at workstations who invent our new pharmaceuticals, computer chips, software, and every other form of advanced technology.

Please do not think too quickly that you understand me. I am not saying that everyone with a high IQ achieves these positions, or that character and industriousness—luck, too, for that matter—don't count. I am not saying that one cannot become a corporate executive or journalist with a lesser IQ. Rather, I am saying that those who reach leadership positions are overwhelmingly drawn from the pool of those in the top 10% of intellectual ability, thereby putting Australia, the United States, and every other advanced nation in the same bind. The top 10% of the intellectual distribution has a huge influence on whether our economies are vital or stagnant, our cultures are healthy or sick, and our institutions are secure or endangered. The furiously resisted but simple truth is that our futures depend crucially on how we educate the next generation of people gifted with unusually high intelligence.

The problem is not getting more education to these children. No evidence indicates that America has many children in the top 10% of intelligence who are not given an opportunity for higher education, and I am told the same is true of Australia. The problem with the education of the gifted involves not their professional training, but their training as citizens.

We live in an age when it is unfashionable to talk about the special responsibility of being gifted, because to do so acknowledges inequality of ability, which is elitist, and inequality of responsibilities, which is also elitist. Because giftedness is not to be talked about, no one tells high-IQ children explicitly, forcefully, and repeatedly that their intellectual talent is a gift; that they are not superior human beings but lucky ones; that the gift brings with it obligations to be worthy of it; and that among those obligations, the most important and most difficult is to aim not just at academic accomplishment, but at wisdom.

The encouragement of wisdom requires a special kind of education. It requires, first of all, recognition of one's own intellectual limits and fallibilities—in a word, humility. This is perhaps the most conspicuously missing part of today's education of the gifted. Many high-IQ students, especially those who avoid serious science and math, go from kindergarten through an advanced degree without ever having a teacher who is dissatisfied with their best work and without ever taking a course that forces them to say to themselves, 'I can't do this.' Humility requires that the gifted learn what it feels like to hit an intellectual wall, just as all of their less-talented peers do, and that can come only from a curriculum and pedagogy designed especially for them. That level of demand cannot fairly be imposed on a classroom that includes children who do not have the ability to respond. The gifted need to have some classes with each other, not to be coddled, but because that is the only setting in which their feet can be held to the fire.

The encouragement of wisdom requires mastery of analytical building blocks. The gifted must assimilate the details of grammar and syntax and the details of logical fallacies not because they will need them to communicate in daily life, but because these are indispensable for precise thinking at an advanced level.

The encouragement of wisdom requires being steeped in the study of ethics, starting with Aristotle and Confucius. It is not enough that gifted children learn to be nice; they must know what it means to be good.

The encouragement of wisdom requires an advanced knowledge of history. Never has the aphorism about the fate of those who ignore history been truer.

All of the above statements are antithetical to the mindset that prevails in today's schools at every level. The gifted should not be taught to be non-judgemental; they need to learn how to make accurate judgements. They should not be taught to be equally respectful of tribal cultures and classical Greece; they should be learning the best in the arts and sciences that has come before them, which will mean a light dose of tribal folkways and a heavy dose of the ancient Greeks. The primary purpose of their education should not be to let the little darlings express themselves, but to give them the tools and the intellectual discipline for expressing themselves as adults.

In short, I am calling for a revival of the classical definition of a liberal education, serving its classic purpose: to prepare an elite to do its duty.

If this elite sounds too much like Plato's guardians, face reality. Plato wanted to choose an elite. We in America and Australia alike are stuck with one. Our economies and cultures are run by a cognitive elite that we do not choose. It is a reality embedded in the nature of modernity. All we can do is try to educate the elite to be conscious of, and prepared to meet, its obligations. For years, we have not even thought about the nature of that task. It is time we did. Is that elitist? Yes. When it comes to securing the future of our cultures, not to be elitist in this sense is a dereliction of duty.

Denis Dutton

The prehistoric origins of anti-elitism

We are approaching this from different points of view, so while I think that I couldn't agree more with Charles, what I am going to say is a different take on our topic. I'm also here not to praise elitism, but to understand it—not so much through a *history* of elites but by talking about elites in *prehistory*.

I'm going to talk about the Pleistocene epoch. Human beings are naturally hierarchical, and they like arranging themselves into hierarchies of skill, age, wealth, competence, experience, whatever. We can deny it if we want, but we all know that when the chips are down and the anarchists have formed the anarchists' association, the first thing they do is elect a governing committee.

The Pleistocene is the period from 1.6 million years ago to ten thousand years ago, when cities began to be built and agriculture was invented and writing was invented. Following it is the modern period—the Holocene. But it's in that much longer period before when the human personality and human sociality were formed; and that's what is so important for evolutionary psychology.

Based on what we know about hunter-gatherer societies from the Pleistocene to the present, we can say a little bit about how hierarchies form in human groups. It's worth considering our Pleistocene inheritance in this context, because although hierarchies are conditioned for every society by local cultural conditions, the will to form hierarchies in human associations is as hardwired as blood-clotting or the liking for sweet and fat.

First, some general sense of fairness is intrinsic to hunter-gatherer hierarchies. Pure self-interest or the interest of your family is not all that counts. There is also fairness in, say, food distribution: the obligation of individuals to divide, rather than keep for themselves or their family, the kill from some successful hunting expedition. As far as status and

opportunity are concerned, I think we'd learn a lot by looking at how hierarchies tend to be found in typical Pleistocene hunting bands.

These bands seem to be adjusted to create maximal success in terms of mobility, flexibility, skill-specialisation, and stealth. They required cooperation. They were male units. Bands of brothers is perhaps going too far, but the standard hunter-gatherer societies were anywhere from twenty-five to 150 people in size, and certainly included a lot of cousins and brothers. It's interesting to note that the size of the hunter-gatherer hunting band, drawn from these societies, was around ten to twelve men, which happens to be the size of the basic platoon in the British army, the squad in the US army, and the basic unit in almost every army since the Romans. It is also close to the default size—nine to twelve men or so—of sports teams in very many sports, and of boards of directors of corporations.

This is a contingent fact about human nature. That is to say, we could have evolved so that the most comfortable operating group was fifty people, or a hundred, or three. Then we'd have a different memory as a species for names and faces, and we'd have a different way of forming associations in societies. But as things evolved for *Homo sapiens*, we came to this number of twelve as a default size of these types of cooperative groups worldwide.

Additionally, these bands, as well as the larger hunter-gatherer groups that they fed and protected, were involved not only in hunting but in running raiding parties and defences against other human raiding parties. They were governed by what are called *reverse dominance hierarchies*. A pure dominance hierarchy is one in which the individual at the top of the heap dominates all those underneath him—likely a *him*, by the way, not a *her*. Such arrangements only become practical on a large scale and in the modern age, that is to say, for the last ten thousand years, with the invention of agriculture and cities, which allow food to be stored and police forces and armies to be fed.

We do have pure dominance hierarchies in the modern world, and we have had them for the past ten thousand years. Stalin's Soviet Union was a pretty good example of a modern pure dominance hierarchy, from the boss on down. It makes me think of wolf hierarchies. I once observed a wolf hierarchy in a zoo, and it was unbelievably brutal if you looked at the one or two animals at the very bottom of the pecking order. The final wolf who's the weakest of the group is tormented night

and day, attacked, howling, constantly in pain and terror. Dominance hierarchies are brutal.

Of course, I say that because I evolved as a member of a reverse dominance hierarchy. We all did. Maybe if we'd evolved differently, which is the contingent part of this, we'd admire wolf hierarchies. But we don't. So a human reverse dominance hierarchy is something that is led by an individual at the top who by dint of skill, talent, or knowledge, or maybe just force of personality, becomes the corporal, the staff sergeant, the team captain, the platoon leader, or the chairman, and the rest of the guys go along with it. It's called a reverse dominance hierarchy because the leader needs the cooperation of the led.

Attempts at dictatorial domination were likely to be responded to in the Pleistocene with exile, homicide, non-cooperation, and, interestingly, ridicule. Ridicule is a standard way for all human societies to deal with people at the top. We need look no further than Australian politics. It seems to be in our genes, if Pleistocene hunter-gatherer groups are indicative, to be suspicious or resentful of whoever is at the top of the heap. We like to think for ourselves, and we demand autonomy and withhold cooperation if we don't get it.

Just a little aside on these groups, and then I'll get back to hierarchy. This desire of human beings for relative autonomy while cooperating in small groups reveals itself clearly in modern, organised mass societies—democracies and dictatorships alike. Americans, for example, and Australians, are inveterate joiners of small groups, special interest clubs for stamp collectors or antique enthusiasts, garden clubs, church groups, service groups such as Rotary and the Lions, sports clubs, Civil War re-enactment societies, and choirs. In modern totalitarian states such as the postwar Soviet Union, it is likely that many citizens who felt alienated from the power of a remote monolithic government invested more of their sense of personal solidarity in a local chess club or in organising outings for children in the Young Pioneers. Such small groups remain hierarchical, though, and people often try to retain status in hierarchies of small groups that they're members of. So, an individual who may have a low situation in his role as a worker in a large corporation or government department may yet be president of a model aeroplane club.

Well-structured societies today, including modern mass democracies, provide adequate outlets for our hunter-gatherer preferences to fit into hierarchies, to achieve relative dominance in them, and to possess

personal autonomy, all at the same time. The variety of independent spheres of life today opens greater possibilities than the Pleistocene did for individuals to fit in, to lead and to follow in organised groups.

Returning to hierarchies and elitism, our intrinsic resentment of leaders, our Pleistocene anti-elitism, may be partly explained by the fact that small-scale tribal societies were zero-sum economies. Everything that was owned by one person was something that someone else could not enjoy. Some psychologists argue that the zero-sum nature of the Pleistocene gives us a psychology that has a lot of trouble grasping concepts of borrowing, interest, and economic growth. In the Pleistocene, people had a very poor notion of inheritance, because mobile bands could not acquire land or much in the way of possessions to pass on to children. Inheritance only became possible when cities were established, along with systems of kingship and ways for power and property to be passed through dynasties. There were no dynasties in the Pleistocene.

The Pleistocene mentality tends to regard anyone who gets rich as having done so at the expense of someone else. When it comes to the benefits of free trade, for instance, this kind of thinking makes us hardwired protectionists. Our intuitions favour basic Pleistocene-style exchanges, but modern economies involve much more than that, and involve processes such as interest and investment that we don't always understand.

There's another way that hierarchies tend to be formed in the hunter-gatherer societies, and it shows itself in the distinction between pure dominance hierarchies and production hierarchies. In a dominance hierarchy, someone 'lords it over' everyone else because of birth inheritance or sheer physical power in some cases. That wasn't really possible in the Pleistocene, because one man couldn't physically control all the other men in the group.

Productive hierarchies are not physically coercive: the guy at the top of the ladder got there because he was somehow more skillful, wise, competent, or creative than other people. Bill Gates' wealth derives from his cleverness, but it is not a cleverness in assassinating rivals. Saddam Hussein, on the other hand, headed a dominance hierarchy. He was very intelligent, too, but it wasn't a productive intelligence; it was used to force people at gunpoint to follow and support him.

Given their Pleistocene inheritance, human beings tend to confuse different types of hierarchies. Anti-elitism in the contemporary world is

a manifestation of ancient tendencies toward envy and resentment. We resent the rich and end up sometimes resenting their achieved values. Such envy is counterproductive. Or we resent the rich and then resent everything that we associate with these ‘elitist bastards.’ An interesting example of this can be found in a book published last year by John Carey, an Oxford don and critic, called *What Good Are the Arts?*

Despite Carey’s great literary insights—he writes wonderfully on the history of British literature generally—he seems to have absolutely no ear for music. His deafness in this area is combined with a huge British class chip on his shoulder. He therefore is certain that the opera is just a way for rich people to show off their jewels and furs: that it’s a ritual, like opening Parliament. It is a scandal for him that Covent Garden receives state subsidies. The structures of hierarchies, if you don’t understand their values, can look pretty strange. Most of us figure we don’t understand enough physics to understand why someone got the Nobel Prize in physics this year, but we sort of take it for granted that it’s probably legit and somebody understands what they’re doing. That kind of humility does not seem to come naturally to John Carey on the subject of the arts, which he does not understand well. (But of course, when you’re talking about the arts and critics, frauds do abound—perhaps Carey has in his day seen too many Derrida-inspired poststructuralist English professors.)

The tendencies I’ve been talking about are in my view permanent features of an evolved human nature. It is part of our Pleistocene inheritance that many people will resent the elitist values they associate with the rich, whether it’s the opera, chardonnay, gallery openings, being able to distinguish between words like *criterion* and *criteria*, using apostrophes properly, or spouting an apposite quote from Shakespeare off the top of your head. There are even French theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu, and some British Marxist sociologists, who try to find grand philosophical justifications for treating anything that the rich can do or seem to enjoy as nothing but a social marker with no intrinsic value.

The defense of elitism in a modern democratic state will be a defense of values of taste and education that are intrinsically, objectively rewarding. We do not have to apologise for preferring science to superstition, Goethe to gangsta rap. Such values in themselves imply nothing about social hierarchies, except insofar as the achievement of elite values may require education. More of that seldom hurts.

Claire Fox

Anti-elitism, enemy of the common people

We are told we live in an anti-elitist age. We no longer accept the word of the old elites. In the past, newspaper editors handed down tablets of stone. Instead, today we have a blogosphere where the masses create the news. Indeed, the old elites seem rather nervous, on the back foot, humble in our wake, especially in front of the young. Recently, at a big launch event for the cultural component of the 2012 Olympic Games in London, attended by all of the great and the good, one of the most powerful and key members of the city's elite, Keith Khan, the games' Head of Culture, turned to a group of teenagers who were on display in the front row and told them earnestly, 'I have got to learn from you.' And he meant it.

We are told that this is the end of deference. Not one for being deferential, that should appeal to me. But actually, I have serious reservations about today's anti-elitism. It is always an attractive prospect for someone like me to have a metaphorical kick at the elites—especially in the UK, with their old school ties and their class and privilege—who snobbishly conclude that they naturally deserve such things as the best of education, arts, and culture, while the rest of us can rot on the sidelines. But, in truth, contemporary anti-elitism is not the answer to such prejudice. It seems to be even more deferential than the old elitism, but to new constituencies. There is nothing attractive about contemporary anti-elitism. Ironically, in today's climate I'm regularly branded with the elitist tag.

In the UK, I have been accused of elitism for the following:

- For defending expertise, and arguing that authority gained from acquired insights and knowledge is more valid than the subjective prejudices of anyone and everyone. Doctors do know more than patients; teachers really do know more than their pupils.

- For arguing against the proposition that J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books are as good as Jane Austen's novels, and for arguing that Beethoven is musically superior to hip-hop.
- For saying that the skills-based vocational diplomas in hairdressing, hospitality, catering, and construction brought in for fourteen-year-olds in the UK are inferior to the study of literature and history.
- For arguing that degrees in media studies, golf studies, and tourism are as not as rigorous as degrees in physics, English literature, and the classics.

In other words, you can be branded an elitist if you don't buy the fashion for cultural relativism, that pernicious orthodoxy that refuses to distinguish between the second-rate and the excellent.

I want to emphasise something else, too: contemporary anti-elitism is actually a con, and at its heart lies a real scorn for ordinary people. But this scorn is dressed up in the language of democratisation. There is an important point here: contemporary anti-elitism is not a bottom-up revolution. It is more the result of the elites having a crisis of nerve about their role in society and their failure to inspire or have anything to offer ordinary people.

Have you noticed how it is often the elites and establishment organisations themselves who champion anti-elitism? They are constantly trying to suck up to ordinary people. There are whole swathes of British institutions that are rebranding themselves as we speak, and producing their branding materials in text-message language and with graffiti graphics. On the fiftieth anniversary of the Duke of Edinburgh's Award in 2005, the outward-bound scheme worried whether it was still relevant to today's youngsters. 'We want to speak with a slightly different voice to young people,' said Peter Westgarth, the chief executive of the awards scheme. Its attempts at a different, 'anti-elitist' voice resulted in 'street cred' slogans such as 'NE14 Fun?', 'Wanna Feel Gr8?', and 'Bored? U Wont B.' Geddit? Meanwhile, the Church of England, worried that it is too elite and exclusive, has announced plans to hold services everywhere from skateboarding parks to pubs and cafés.

Have you noticed that it is the elites that spend all their time chasing after us, trying to include us, to empower us, to listen to us? Inclusivity and access are the buzzwords in policy circles and management meetings rather than at the barricades. Politicians in the UK are constantly setting

up focus groups and asking our opinion on what they should do. They consult electors daily on what policies they should adopt. Both political parties have big conversation initiatives; MPs have been told to set up blogs and they keep asking us to talk to them. Political party policy units set up groups of researchers who proudly boast they read Facebook every day so that they see what we are interested in. It feels like stalking!

Middle-aged politicians are particularly obsessed with chasing after young people. In fact, Kevin Rudd isn't the only one flirting with youth on YouTube. The UK Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, has given government grants to local authorities, making it a requirement that they consult young people on local initiatives on everything from waste disposal to education provision. Every government green paper has a new youth version with big writing and cartoons, and there are youth parliaments and shadow youth councils everywhere. I would say this is less a sign that we live in a democratising age than it is proof that the political elite are fearful of making decisions, and are desperately trying to connect with their constituents.

You can see this in another institution that has declared war on elitism, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). To be honest, the BBC seems to be having a nervous breakdown combined with an extended bout of self loathing. They keep worrying that they are too elite and distant from viewers and listeners. In recent years, they have commissioned numerous reports and internal reviews, which have concluded that the BBC is too metropolitan, too white, and run by too many middle-aged men in suits, who are too elite, too middle-class, and too distant to appeal to 'ordinary people.' Peter Horrocks, head of the BBC's television news services, gave an important speech at the Reuters Institute on 28 November 2006, where he called for an anti-elitist revolution because 'the BBC is seen as forbidding ... We need to make it warm, accessible.'

The BBC has set up a panel of fifteen thousand viewers 'selected to represent the population as a whole, to give their views on each evening's programmes.' So now the BBC can adapt programs to keep the audience happy. Interacting with the audience has become a key component of every BBC television and radio channel. There are endless phone-ins, and presenters tiresomely read out a constant flow of text messages and emails from viewers and listeners before we're inevitably told to 'join in the debate' online. You can't watch the news without seeing the silly

ticker tape saying ‘email in the news that matters to you.’ There is a big initiative to give the viewers the right to answer back. This leads to the ludicrous situation where Nick Robinson, the chief political editor at the BBC, has been told to blog daily to connect with the audience. Despite Nick’s insider knowledge and years of experience, he is told to use the often rambling, ill-informed barroom ‘responses from the audience [to] form ... an important part of ... developing [his] judgments.’

Of course, new technologies partly explain democratising phenomena such as user-generated content. I don’t think it quite explains why the traditional elites are so in awe of and enthusiastic about public participation. Take the example of *Time* magazine, one of the most elite, old-school journalism outfits around. *Time* has had a Person of the Year issue annually since 1927. Nomination is highly prestigious and the source of much speculation. Previous winners have included Nelson Mandela, Bill and Melinda Gates, Bono, George Bush, and even Adolf Hitler. Whatever you think of them, these are people of substance. In 2006 they put a mirror on the cover of the Person of the Year issue. Who won the coveted award? ‘You’ won, and ‘you’ won, and I won, because the cover ‘literally reflects the idea that you not us at *Time* magazine are transforming the information age ... wrestling power from the few ... democratising the web for the people.’

Maybe we should be flattered that everyone wants our opinion, our news stories, our video clips. But I’d be rather wary about this cloying flattery. It has some really nasty and ironically elitist assumptions lying behind it. In some ways, the anti-elitist elite are not listening to us at all. It has become de rigueur at every policy event in the arts, media, or politics that I attend to have a youth speaker. Every time, some hapless sixteen-year-old stands up and gives a mediocre speech, for which they invariably receive rapturous applause, and probably a standing ovation, regardless of what they say. Of course, they are not being applauded for their words. Rather, they are being patted on the back for being young and being there. These fawning adults are using the kids as a stage army to ensure that their institution is seen as being in touch.

The obvious point is that teenage speakers are often self-indulgent, banal, derivative, and clichéd. But why wouldn’t they be? After all, they are teenagers. That wouldn’t matter if we, the adults, didn’t tell them their views were interesting regardless. The problem here is not the teenagers, but the spinelessness of a sycophantic elite. All this has

negative consequences for young people, because it encourages an unhelpful narcissism. We do not expose the young to honest criticism, and therefore we deny them the chance to discover what they don't know but could find out, and how they could improve. We deprive them of being encouraged to stand on the shoulders of giants. Instead, they are told their own untutored insights are special and deserve ovations.

To be honest, it is also dangerous when the anti-elitist elites do listen. In the UK, there has been a major overhaul of the science GCSEs (exams for secondary school students around the ages of fourteen to sixteen), and that change has been because too many students have been failing physics, biology, and chemistry. In anti-elitist Britain, you cannot fail anything.

The educational authorities did a national survey that asked pupils why they were failing, and why many were opting out of studying science further on in their schooling. The majority of teenagers complained that physics and the other hard sciences were dull and boring. The Department for Education then took these fourteen and fifteen year olds at their word, and reformed the curriculum to create the Twenty First Century Science courses, which are supposed not to be dull and boring. Out goes the periodic table, the structure of the atom, and anything too abstract; in come modules on mobile phones, healthy eating, and the drugs debate. Cannabis may be more fascinating to teenagers than quadratic equations, but letting such immature, philistine opinions dictate education policy is obviously worrying.

I'm not blaming the pupils. What young person voluntarily welcomes the pain and effort of being intellectually stretched? Inevitably, the young would prefer their study to be easy and to fit in with their social life and their PlayStations. The tragedy is that these views are wheeled out and cited by grown-ups who should know better. While such reforms are cited as examples of the great anti-elitist education revolution, in fact they institutionalise ignorance. The new Twenty First Century Science curriculum has been rejected by many fee-paying schools—that is, the really elite private schools—because of its 'terrifying absence of proper science.' So it therefore looks like future scientists will come from the ranks of the elite private schools, not state schools, and all this is in the name of anti-elitism.

Some of the worst contributors to the new anti-elite orthodoxy are museums and heritage sites. You can understand this; after all, this sector

comprises what might seem to be the epitome of old-fashioned elitism—fusty old buildings full of antiquities and arcane stuff that is hardly cool and hip. As a consequence, their directors are desperately trying to sex the places up. They no longer focus on collections and historic buildings, but on visitors and the audience. In museums, curators and scholars with specialist knowledge derived from studying the Ming dynasty or ancient Egypt are now packed off on reeducation courses in audience development, participation, and access. These curators are so browbeaten that they even hand over decisions about what should be in museums to the public, in the name of inclusion. Now museums have everyone from the homeless to people from old people's homes invited in to curate their own history by donating objects that 'mean the most to you.'

The heritage world has also been keen to prove its anti-elitist credentials. The thinking goes that castles and stately homes are too grand to attract ordinary people. So in deciding what might hook in the masses to heritage, leaders of heritage have come up with a really clever wheeze. They think we might be more interested and comfortable if heritage were about—you guessed it—us! So now heritage has been rebranded as 'personal placemaking.' And places of universal historic significance, or of national value, must now give way to the local and personal. According to Debi Roker and Helen Richardson in a study undertaken for the Heritage Lottery Fund, some recent literature puts forward the view that heritage is now 'no longer a prescribed set of activities or artefacts, but a personal construction, as individual as each person's identity.' The Heritage Lottery Fund has a 'Your Heritage' project, and English Heritage has a 'My Heritage Project.'

Now it will be the punters—not the cultural elites—who define what should be part of heritage. English Heritage encourages us to tell them 'which places, buildings, local sites or landmarks mean the most to you. Importantly, it allows that 'these need not be well-known, just important to you.' The Attingham Trust report 'Opening Doors: Learning in the Historic Environment' suggests that 'historic properties should consult with local communities and visitors, *as well as those who do not want to visit*, about what they would like to experience in order in increase their relevance to everyone' (emphasis added).

But isn't this an abdication of responsibility? When people who know about heritage are so defensive about their own role that they give over decision-making power to those who *don't* know about heritage,

one suspects that ordinary people and their lives are being used to guide a heritage sector that has lost its confidence. Seriously, how will people know what they would like to experience? After all, the leaders of the heritage industry seem more preoccupied with admonishing themselves for once being high and mighty than they are with offering audiences a window onto new knowledge. They have abandoned trying to introduce the public to anything unfamiliar, in case it alienates them.

If the public is only encouraged to view historic artefacts and places in personal terms, it seriously threatens the important and specific role museums and heritage play in allowing us to glimpse other times and places, taking us out of the present by giving us insights into societies with the strangeness of that foreign country called the past. Anti-elitists seem content to confine us to the present, where we will narrowly gaze at our navels.

It is a similar story at the BBC. Its head of television news, Peter Horrocks, confessed in a lecture to St Anne's College and the Reuter's Institute in 2007 that some broadcasters of his generation went into TV to produce 'journalism that would really change people's understanding of the world and shape the views of the audience.' That sounds like an admirable aspiration, but Peter and his peers have abandoned trying to shape viewers' understanding, because they are too busy chasing their attention. He talks of the 'spread of [an] anti-elitist revolution in journalism,' which means 'we need to leave behind the desire some broadcasters previously held—to tell the people what to think.' They appear to have stopped trying to build audiences for challenging, difficult, or enlightening output. Worse, like the elites in other spheres, having lost faith in their own mission they have also lost faith in us, the public, and our capacity to be stretched. When you look at TV controllers' views of what they presume viewers want, it reveals more about their own prejudices than about ordinary people.

Of course, there is a constant diet of reality TV available, which is described as democratic because it puts ordinary people on camera. But I'm less worried about that than the fact that the serious genres have come to treat the public like idiots. Look at what Peter Horrocks' anti-elitist news looks like: there is a simplistic explanation for everything. The big stories are accompanied by quirky camera angles and a video wall of flashy graphics in case we get bored. This dumbed-down news presumes we have the attention span of a gnat; broadcasters really must think that

the majority of people are stupid. In their own reports, we are told that the majority of the population, the working class, would be put off by professionally detached presenters.

We are told that ‘re-engaging ... audiences, predominantly in social groups C2, D and E, will require significant shifts for BBC News.’ Apparently, this socioeconomic group will relate better if it is presented in an emotional, ‘your heart goes out to them’ style. And what news is deemed suitable? Horrocks urges an ‘unembarrassed embrace of subject areas that have been too often looked down on as pavement level or parish-pump.’ These stories ‘need to be told in accents ... that this audience recognises,’ presented by matey journalists. These quotes reveal the gross caricature at the heart of the anti-elitist agenda, which portrays the working classes as incapable of thinking and analysing world issues, able only to feel and empathise, and to relate to the narrow and parochial. The idea of the noble savage is back in fashion, and this indicates the prejudiced view that intellectual cultural debates are inherently middle class, holding no possible interest for the hoi polloi.

Ironically, the unstated assumption of all this anti-elitism is more patronising than anything we could attribute to some elitist bogeyman. Without saying so directly, the anti-elitists are implying that the higher reaches of culture and ideas could not possibly be of interest to most people, so there is no point in offering it to them.

In conclusion, I have to ask—are ordinary people up to engaging with the best of culture, aspiring to difficult goals, challenging art forms, and understanding notions beyond their immediate everyday experience? Or should we be satisfied with being flattered, having exhibitions curated by our mates, and having rubbish second-rate vocational degrees sold to us as university education? Maybe it will be hard to reach the heights of high culture, but there is something valuable and difficult to be esteemed in the arts, philosophy, and science, and in understanding current affairs. Everyone should have the chance to acquire the discipline necessary to appreciate it. Some people will find it easier than others. Many more won’t be interested, but at least they should have the opportunity. With a decent liberal education, a thriving arts sector, and intelligent, enquiring media, even the most plodding among us can be stuffed with enough history, literature, mathematics, science, and knowledge of the world to access the best that is thought or known.

I'm a fan of Jonathan Rose's book *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, a wonderful study of nineteenth-century autodidacts and the early workers' education movement. I want to finish with a quote from a cowman's son on discovering the joy of literature: 'It was like coming up from the bottom of the ocean and seeing the universe for the first time.' In today's anti-elitist climate, we would probably leave this agricultural worker on the seabed, give him a handheld camera to film himself, and broadcast the results on BBC News. We'd tell him not to bother reading at all, because his natural aptitude for cowerding is just as valuable as any skill in literature. Having deprived him of those elitist novels, we would then give him a degree in rustic studies. Instead of all that, let's defend elitism now.

