

## ***His Master's Voice***

*Reviewed by Paula Grunseit*

### **David Marr, *His Master's Voice: The corruption of public debate Under Howard***

**Melbourne : Black Inc., 2007**

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'Since 1996, [John] Howard has cowed his critics, muffled the press, intimidated the ABC, gagged scientists, silenced non-government organisations, neutered Canberra's mandarins, curtailed parliamentary scrutiny, censored the arts, banned books, criminalised protest and prosecuted whistleblowers.' (p.4)

You always know where you stand with David Marr. His views are bold and you may not agree with them but he's got the guts to express them unreservedly—needless to say, backed up by meticulous investigative journalism.

In his view, John Howard 'lies without shame' and his government 'has been the most unscrupulous corrupter of public debate in Australia since the Cold War's worst days back in the 1950's'.

'The defining mood of the Howard years is an uneasy fear of each other, the fear that we're growing apart, that we're not engaged in the same enterprise of being Australian.' (p.46)

*His Master's Voice*, a grim and well-told story without a happy ending, traces a decade of assault on public debate and democracy, the history of Australians' failure to prevent it and the evolution of the so-called 'Howard mainstream'.

In preparation for his essay, Marr began to keep what he describes as 'a diary of outrages' and these form the core of evidence supporting his argument.

'I thought one or two examples of government bullying would be good to throw into the rhetorical mix. But they kept coming week after week: attacks by Howard and his ministers on open and honest debate. They continue as we go to press. Quite unexpectedly the essay turned into a snapshot of a couple of months of free speech sabotaged in a country that seems to be showing signs at last—though this could just be the Pollyanna in me—of being worried about what's at stake.' (p.6)

Many of the incidents described will not be new to you as readers. You have either been superficially aware of them or have followed them in greater depth in the media. They include:

- 'ruthless attacks on experts' such as David Peetz (Workchoices), Andrew Wilkie (Iraq War) Professor Graeme Pearman (global warming)
- Overturning of the Northern Territory's euthanasia laws and banning Philip Nitschke's *Peaceful Pill Handbook* (still available for download on Google books)
- Treatment of G20 demonstrators and the increasing police presence at universities as APEC approaches
- Raiding of bookshops and banning of DVDs/books purportedly advocating terrorism
- Undermining of press freedom embodied by Australia's shameful fall to thirty-fifth place on the Press Freedom Index (compiled by Reporters without Borders)
- Tightening of anti-terrorism laws, strengthening of sedition laws and failure of Freedom of Information laws
- Prosecution of whistleblowers (former Customs officer Allan Kessing)
- Persecution of public servants leaking information (Trent Smith of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade)
- Case of Tamil asylum seekers held on Christmas Island
- The Balibo killings trial.

You are probably no longer surprised by these accounts or by those that have occurred subsequently and continue to occur almost on a daily basis since the essay was published. As Marr puts it: 'We roll with it because we have come to expect his [John Howard's] government to behave like this. We're habituated.'

That may be the case but he also asks us to ask ourselves how we allowed this to happen.

'We haven't been hoodwinked. Each step along the way has been reported—perhaps not as thoroughly and passionately as it should have been, but we're not dealing in dark secrets here. We've known what's going on. If we cared, we didn't care enough to stop it. Boredom, indifference and fear have played a part in this. So does something about ourselves we rarely face: Australians trust authority. Not love, perhaps, but trust. It's bred in the bone. We call ourselves larrikins, but we leave our leaders to get on with it. Even the leaders we mock.'

Having recently returned to university to study and having marched and signed a petition here and there myself, I found Marr's accounts of the

treatment of demonstrators and increasing police and probable ASIO presence on campuses particularly chilling.

A *Sydney Morning Herald* article (July 11) revealed that my own place of study, the University of Technology Sydney, had permitted police access to twenty-two student records with the majority of reasons cited as 'criminal investigation'. It seems things wouldn't be too promising under a Labor government either.

'Demonstrators are despised by the tabloid press and both sides of politics. Kevin Rudd called the old lefties and students who tried to march along George Street the night Dick Cheney came to town "a bunch of violent ferals and they should expect absolutely no sympathy".'

In fact, according to Marr, a lot of our problems began under Labor. 'Many of us complaining now did not complain loudly enough back then as Paul Keating bullied the press, the public service and the parliament.'

We certainly can't change the past but let's not be afraid to complain more loudly so that we have more say in our future.