

# The Art of Dissent

OR

*If you are crazy enough to be an artist, why not take on the establishment as well?*

**Julian Burnside**

The Third Annual MCA Address, given at the MCA Annual Assembly in Melbourne on  
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27 September is an interesting day historically, for politics and for music. Let me give some examples: some of them have a bearing on my subject this afternoon.

Here is just a short selection of significant events which have happened on 27 September:

1787 – the United States Constitution was delivered to the states for ratification. They later replied by proposing 10 amendments, which were adopted and became the Bill of Rights

1942 - Glenn Miller and his Orchestra performed in Passaic County, New Jersey for the last time before Miller entered the US Army.

1964 - Warren Commission report issued, concluding that Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, assassinated President John F. Kennedy

1996 - In Afghanistan, the Taliban captured Kabul after driving out President Burhanuddin Rabbani and executing former leader Mohammad Najibullah.

1928 - Ariel Sharon was born

1951 - Meat Loaf was born

1921 - Engelbert Humperdinck died

1960 - Sylvia Pankhurst died

The following musical works were recorded on 27 September:

1911 "Alexander's Ragtime Band" (Irving Berlin)

1927 "Dark Eyes" with Feodor Chaliapin & choir, the Aristov Balalaika Orchestra conducted by Scriabin

1929 "Gay Love" (words Sidney Clare, music Oscar Levant) - Bing Crosby with a small group from Paul Whiteman's Orchestra

1932 "Nothing But A Lie" (Sievier, Rotter, Fred Markush) - Gertrude Lawrence, with Claude Ivy on piano

1933 "Night And Day" (Cole Porter)

1938 "There Is No Death" (Geoffrey O'Hara) - Peter Dawson (disproved fairly conclusively when he died in 1961)

1938 "Colonel Bogey - March" (Kenneth J. Alford)

1938 "Nightmare" (Artie Shaw)

1941 "No Lika Da War" (Nesham, Stanley Holloway)

1954 "Make Yourself Comfortable" (Bob Merrill) - Peggy King with Percy Faith's orchestra.

Unhappily, although today is such a conspicuously important day, Bryan Adams' CD "On a Day Like Today" was not released on a day like today, but on a day like 20 October, 1998.

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Dissent has many forms. It can range from casual disapproval to deadly confrontation. Minor differences of opinion are inevitable if a person has a fully formed character: to agree with all opinions is to have no character at all. To limit your range of experience so as to avoid encountering disagreeable alternatives is to miss much of the richness of a rounded life.

So, we will all spend our lives in only partial harmony with those around us. To talk meaningfully about dissent, we must take this level of disagreement as the baseline.

The ultimate expression of dissent is war. The American War of Independence was an expression of dissent, the elements of which were plainly articulated in writing in advance. This makes it a relatively unusual war: generally the fog descends well before the hostilities begin. The reasons for the war of Independence were set out in the famous document signed on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July 1776. One key passage in the Declaration of Independence is well known, but the clear formulation of a message of dissent is less well remembered:

“When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.--We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,-- That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organising its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. ...”

What was demanded in ink was delivered in blood. The dissenters prevailed and ultimately formed a nation, and a system of Government, which has made a greater mark on history than any before it.

In 2003, that same nation helped re-shape the world's future. On 5 February 2003, Colin Powell announced America's intention to invade Iraq. The announcement was made outside the entrance to the Security Council of the United Nations. He stood in front of a wall which bears a reproduction of Picasso's Guernica – one of the best-known examples of the art of dissent. It bluntly portrays the horrors of war. However for Colin Powell's announcement, Guernica had been modestly covered over with a blue sheet, so that the tens of millions who saw, on television, the world's only super power declare war on Iraq, would not be reminded of the horrors about to be unleashed. Only a few recognised that, in that simple gesture, a country born of dissent stifled an inconvenient mark of dissent. A commentator wrote in the New York Times: "Mr Powell can't very well seduce the world into bombing Iraq surrounded on camera by shrieking and mutilated women, men, children, bulls and horses."

It is true that Picasso was air-brushed out of a moment in history, but his voice was not stilled. His message remains visible for all to see.

It is in times of stress that dissent is most needed. It is in times of stress that the voices of dissent will be suppressed. But the voices at risk of suppression are those which are recognised by the State, and the State is not always literate in the language of dissent. Whilst politicians and bureaucrats may pore obsessively over political tracts, they are not always at home in music or painting or even poetry.

Generally, prose is considered by the authorities to be the most dangerous, perhaps because they are prosaic people. This is a function of two things. First, ordinary speech uses the vocabulary which is common to all of us. If the speaker or writer has an adequate grasp of the language, then meaning will be plain for all to see. The threat to authority is clear and – if harsh

measures are to be taken – the transgression can be plainly identified: the Defendant expressed anti-revolutionary sentiments etc.

Second, the politicians and bureaucrats who typically look after the repressive measures are often people of exceptional dullness – they can understand prose, while the same message couched in poetic metaphor or the vocabulary of music or painting will escape unnoticed.

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James Thurber was a popular writer in America in the 1950s. While McCarthyism was doing its doleful worst, Thurber wrote seemingly innocent stories in the manner of Aesop's fables. Thurber's *Fables for our Time* and *Further Fables for our Time* tell enchanting little stories with animals as their protagonists. These Fables, properly understood, argue for free speech and honesty, and argue against deception and oppression. Thurber was deeply subversive but almost impossible to censor: who could justify suppressing an innocent story about lemmings running off a cliff, or a mouse which ate too much?

And how would a censor have dealt with this poem of Auden:

"Perfection, of a kind, was what he was after,  
And the poetry he invented was easy to understand;  
He knew human folly like the back of his hand,  
And was greatly interested in armies and fleets;  
When he laughed, respectable senators burst with laughter,  
And when he cried the little children died in the streets."

The sting in the poem is that the subject is not identified, and no tyrant could assert that he was the subject of the poem without admitting the truth the poem seeks to expose.

The power of the hidden but recognised message is clear in at least two major symphonic works which come to mind. Shostakovich's 5<sup>th</sup> Symphony – ostensibly a work of apology to the State – ends with a long slow movement which was widely understood by its audience as an extended, haunting reference to the wastelands of the Siberian Gulag.

Another interesting example, not well enough known, is the choral movement of Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony. The text is drawn from Schiller's poem "An die Freude" – To Joy. As Schiller originally wrote it, it was "An die Freiheit" – To Freedom. This was in the days of Metternich whose reputation for oppression had grown progressively since 1815. He imposed harsh censorship in Austria. Teachers and writers suspected of liberal views were blacklisted. To speak of freedom was dangerously unacceptable. Whilst an Ode to Joy would pass the censors, an Ode to Freedom would certainly not.

Beethoven's liberal thinking emphatically supported the original spirit of the French Revolution, and in his use of Schiller's text – widely recognised for what it truly meant – was an act of defiance characteristic of Beethoven.

Beethoven's original intention was carried into execution in a performance of Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony on 25 December 1989 when Leonard Bernstein conducted a performance of it to celebrate the fall of the Berlin Wall. In that performance, *Freiheit* not *Freude* was sung. Throughout 1989, Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> was played over loudspeakers by students in Tiananmen Square, as a protest against tyranny.

If Beethoven were alive today, I am sure he would write something – perhaps an 11<sup>th</sup> Symphony – possibly on the theme of the Loopy Republican or the Lying Rodent.

Shostakovich's Second Piano Trio was written in 1944. It is dedicated to the memory of his friend Sollertinsky, who had perished in a concentration camp. It includes Jewish themes in its final movement as a protest against the Holocaust. It is a haunting statement of a powerful message, and more enduring than any journalism.

There are many other examples of music written for the purpose of articulating a message of protest. Haydn's Farewell Symphony was an articulate complaint about the conditions faced by

musicians in the Esterhazy court. Paradoxically, if it were written in Australia today, it would probably breach the Workplace Relations Act.

In Australia, we have had less to protest about, until recently. In 2003 Brett Dean wrote *Eclipse* for string quartet based on the events in August 2001 when the Australian Government asked the Captain of the MV Tampa to rescue some asylum seekers whose boat had foundered, but then refused to allow the Tampa to bring those same people to the nearest port which happened to be in the Australian territory of Christmas Island. At least two operas are being written about the Tampa episode. It is tempting to speculate that the role of the lawyers in such an opera should be written for castrati.

Martin Wesley-Smith has written a piece, "Weapons of Mass Distortion", on the war in Iraq, a piece about Afghanistan and a dozen or so pieces about East Timor as well as various pieces on the subject of conservation.

In the realm of popular music, there is a remarkable array of composers and performers using music as a vehicle of protest, including Archie Roach, Ruby Hunter, Kev Carmody, Yothu Yindi, Kavisha Mazella and many others.

On 5 August 2004, the New York Times ran an article by Bruce Springsteen. The purpose of the piece can be judged from the following paragraphs:

“Through my work, I've always tried to ask hard questions. Why is it that the wealthiest nation in the world finds it so hard to keep its promise and faith with its weakest citizens? Why do we continue to find it so difficult to see beyond the veil of race? How do we conduct ourselves during difficult times without killing the things we hold dear? Why does the fulfillment of our promise as a people always seem to be just within grasp yet forever out of reach?

I don't think John Kerry and John Edwards have all the answers. I do believe they are sincerely interested in asking the right questions and working their way toward honest solutions. They understand that we need an administration that places a priority on fairness, curiosity, openness, humility, concern for all America's citizens, courage and faith. ...”

It is an interesting and sobering reflection on the times we are in when a popular musician is impelled to make such an observation.

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The problem for the mainstream in Australian life is that misery and injustice are unevenly distributed, and selfishness is officially sanctioned. Against that background, it is easy to see why many members of the Australian community do not notice that there is anything to protest about.

We are an odd, contradictory nation.

We are prosperous and generous, yet our overseas aid is declining in real terms.

We are welcoming and friendly, yet we have treated asylum seekers with a harshness which has shocked many and shamed us all.

This contradiction is perfectly illustrated at Baxter detention centre, in the South Australian desert.

Baxter, 5 hours north-west of Adelaide, opened in August 2002. Mr Ruddock announced it as Australia's "family-friendly" detention centre.

Stand outside Baxter, facing east and the view is a perfect Fred Williams landscape: dull grey-green scrub on red sand, tumbling away for miles to a rim of hills undimmed by distance.

Turn and face west: a silver shimmering electric fence, six metres high, fills the field of view; beyond it 20 metres of no-man's land, then another tall and glittering line of wire and mesh. Inside the second fence is a series of compounds made of uncompromising corrugated iron,

where the refugees are held. The compounds have no windows, so that the inmates have no view except of the sky. And Australians cannot see those who are locked inside.

Once you pass through strict security checks and enter Baxter you find the real tragedy, our hidden shame. Asylum seekers walk around as if still alive; they talk as if they still have a hold on rational thinking. They press hospitality on you: it is a deeply ingrained cultural instinct, but it seems more like the unwilling twitching of a dying animal. They are not wholly present: they seem hollowed out, dried, lifeless things, washed up and stranded beyond the high-water mark; their minds gone, shredded, destroyed by hopelessness and despair. Children are incontinent from stress; many inmates are afflicted with blindness or lameness which has no organic origin: the bewildered mind's final, mute protest.

That is Australia's "family-friendly" detention centre.

It is not an offence to arrive in Australia without papers. Nevertheless, Australia's Migration Act provides that anyone who arrives here without a visa must be detained until they receive a visa or are removed from the country. Detention of innocent people is a serious moral problem, difficult to justify for more than a very short time. Australia's policy of mandatory detention of asylum seekers has been criticised by church leaders and human rights organisations around the world.

On 8 July 2004, Mr Howard made a speech in Adelaide reaffirming his commitment to "a fair and decent Australia". This sits ill with the Howard government's recent conduct.

On 6 August 2004 the High Court decided a case concerning a failed asylum seeker. He has not been granted a visa. He asked to be removed from Australia. He cannot be removed because there is no country he can go to. The government argued for, and won, the right to hold him in detention *for the rest of his life*. He has not committed any offence, but he faces the prospect of spending the rest of his life in a high security prison.

The government could have amended the legislation to avoid that result. In its pursuit of a "fair and decent society" it prefers to imprison innocent people for life.

Amin arrived in Australia in March 2001 with his daughter Massoumeh. She was then 5 years old. They were held in Curtin, then in Baxter.

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of July 2003, 3 ACM guards entered Amin's room and ordered him to strip. He refused, because, apart from it being deeply humiliating for a Muslim man to be naked in front of others, his 7-year old daughter was in the room. When he refused to strip, the guards beat him up, handcuffed him, and took him to the "Management Unit".

The Management Unit is a series of solitary confinement cells.

Officially, solitary confinement is not used in Australia's detention system. Officially, recalcitrant detainees are placed in the Management Unit. The truth is that the Management Unit at Baxter is solitary confinement bordering on total sensory deprivation. I have viewed a video tape of one of the Management Unit cells. It shows a cell about 3 ½ metres square, with a mattress on the floor. There is no other furniture; the walls are bare. A doorway, with no door, leads into a tiny bathroom. The cell has no view outside; it is never dark. The occupant has nothing to read, no writing materials, no TV or radio; no company yet no privacy because a video camera observes and records everything, 24 hours a day. The detainee is kept in the cell 23 ½ hours a day. For half an hour a day he is allowed into a small exercise area where he can see the sky.

No court has found him guilty of any offence; no court has ordered that he be held this way.

There he stayed from 14 July until 23 July: each 24 hours relieved only by a half-hour visit from his daughter, Massoumeh. But on 23 July she did not come. It was explained to him that the manager of Baxter, Greg Wallace, had taken her shopping in Port Augusta.

The next day, 24 July, she did not arrive for her visit: the manager came and explained that Massoumeh was back in Tehran. She had been removed from Australia under cover of a lie, without giving Amin the chance to say goodbye to her.

Amin remained in detention for another 8 weeks. It took 3 applications in court to get him released. The government did not contradict the facts, or try to explain why they had removed Massoumeh from the country: they argued simply that the court had no power to dictate how a person would be treated in detention.

The judge found otherwise and ordered that Amin be removed from solitary confinement and be moved to a different detention centre.

The government appealed.

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Shostakovich lived a precarious life in Stalin's Russia; Beethoven's difficulties were more the result of his defiant and tempestuous personality than any political engagement; Haydn seems to have lived a life more charmed than most artists enjoy.

Bruce Springsteen makes a good living.

Brett Dean has not been persecuted for his musical comment on the Tampa episode, although it's difficult to say with any confidence that his immunity is assured.

However that may be, if an Australian composer ever did write an opera called the Lying Rodent, it's hard to be confident that it would receive Australia Council support, whatever its musical merits.

Dissent is less easy in Australia today than it has been for some time. In the domain of ordinary speech, it is possible to speak but not to be heard. The reason is not hard to find. Our media are closely held by a few big players. The Packer and Murdoch press are much less vigorous in their pursuit of the truth than we are entitled to expect. The dominant voice almost invariably coincides with the interests of the Government.

Let a couple of instances suffice. During the 2001 election campaign, Mr Howard and his team made much of the story that some refugees had thrown their children overboard. The story was false. There was never any evidence to support it. Mr Howard recklessly repeated the lie without ever doubting it and obviously without ever seeing any evidence to support it.

The story was later proven false. Later still it emerged that Mr Howard had been told it was false all along. Mr Howard claims to be a Christian, and pretends to stand for family values. How surprising then that he should level such wicked allegations at people who were, inevitably, unable to answer his charge. If the allegations had been made by someone with no pretension to Christian virtue they would have been bad enough. How much worse coming from one who lays claim to Christian virtue.

But how lightly the press dealt with Mr Howard when his lie was exposed. A dishonest Prime Minister is a danger to democracy, but the press seem not to care that the PM lies.

And another example. Section 209 of the Migration Act provides that a person held in immigration detention is liable for the costs of their detention. It is a remarkable thing, at the best of times, that an innocent person who is incarcerated is made liable for the financial cost of their own incarceration. A bit of research reveals that no other country on earth makes innocent people liable for the cost of their own detention. Looking back through history reveals only two examples which Australia could look to as precedents. The first is the law of suspects, passed on 17 September 1793 whilst post-revolutionary France was ruled by Robespierre, during the period generally known as the Terror. The Law of Suspects empowered the local Committees of Security to detain people suspected of harbouring anti-revolutionary thoughts. Those people, whilst detained, were liable for the costs of their own detention. More recently, the phenomenon is exemplified by a document held in the Ploetzensee Museum. It is a bill dated May of 1944 addressed to the family of a man and charging the family with the daily costs of his detention in a concentration camp, the cost of gassing him to death and the cost of the postage stamp. In Australia, the detention charge has GST added.

These examples suggest that Australia is in very bad company. However despite my best endeavours to interest members of the press in something which seems quite outrageous, it was

nine months before I could persuade any journalist to write anything at all about this remarkable phenomenon.

One of the most powerful mechanisms tending to stifle debate about unpopular or uncomfortable subjects is self-censorship. This phenomenon is very powerful at present in the ABC as well as in the commercial media, although the reasons are different in each case. This self-censorship emphasises the power of art as a medium of dissent. Australia is not yet at the stage where paintings or music or sculpture will be suppressed on account of the uncomfortable message it implies. The marketplace of aesthetics is in much healthier condition than the marketplace of ideas. No journalist's voice will ever be as durable as the works of Beethoven, Shostakovich, Goya or Picasso.

This puts artists in a position of real privilege – perhaps the only privilege we accord them.

Perhaps we should consider treating them better, valuing them more and rewarding them according to their value. They are the soul of a nation and its conscience.