Meanjin

At war with ourselves

By Mark Davis

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She was all over our screens one minute and gone the next. In 2007, aged 15, she fled Somalia after a rocket attack in the civil war between the government and the Islamic terrorist group al-Shabaab hit her home and killed her family. She arrived on Christmas Island in October 2013 and was sent to Nauru two days later. Then, two years later, for a few weeks in late 2015, she found herself used as a political pawn in Australia's culture wars.

Abyan is the pseudonym used to protect the identity of the pregnant 23-year-old Somali refugee who in July 2015 claimed to have been raped and who, because abortion laws are extremely restrictive in Nauru, was evacuated to Australia from Nauru in October to terminate the pregnancy. Then, five days after leaving Nauru, she was flown back there on a secret $115,000 charter flight without having had the abortion, without her lawyer's knowledge, and against her will, even though the previous year she had been found to be a genuine refugee. According to Immigration Minister Peter Dutton, after 'four or five days of medical consultations', including with doctors, Abyan had opted against termination, a claim her lawyers denied. According to a note written by Abyan, she never said she didn't want a termination and never saw a doctor, only a nurse.[1] According to refugee advocates she had been returned against her will so as to thwart legal proceedings that would have kept her in Australia.[2] After she was returned to Nauru she was holed up in a makeshift shack like other asylum seekers who had been found to be refugees, and released from the detention centre in October 2015 to protect the Australian government from possible claims of illegal detention.

That's where *Australian* journalist Chris Kenny found her, staying in a 'cramped room … in one of the many clumps of makeshift refugee accommodation dotted around Nauru'. Kenny has worked in the offices of state and federal government ministers. He is associate editor (national affairs) of the *Australian* and a presenter of his own show on Sky News. In footage shown on ABC television's *Media Watch*, he does a piece to camera from a beach somewhere in Nauru with palm trees swaying in the background, then wanders around an encampment full of white tents, like David Attenborough stalking some rare species.

The first of two stories that subsequently appear in the *Australian* is based on an interview with Abyan and claims she still wants an abortion, which contradicts the Immigration Minister. In the second story Kenny tells how Abyan didn't want to report the rape to police and candidly says she is distressed by the media attention, including his.[3] By then his presence on Nauru is itself becoming a media story. *Media Watch* devotes a segment to how he had been given permission to enter when many other journalists had tried and been rejected. Had he been granted insider access because of his public support for the government's border protection policies? Kenny's response to these questions is, 'If my public support for strong border protection measures helped sway Nauru's decision, so be it.'[4]

Watching Kenny report from Nauru and reading his stories about Abyan in the*Australian*, I was reminded of another time, another island and another interview. This other island is Hindmarsh Island near the mouth of the Murray River in South Australia and the interview was broadcast just over 20 years earlier. This was an interview Kenny did with an Aboriginal man called Doug Milera. In the eight minutes of the interview shown on national television Milera, who looked to be somewhat inebriated, claimed to be the 'fabricator' of 'secret women's business' that Ngarrindjeri women had argued should prevent the building of a bridge to the island since it would desecrate spiritually important land.

Those eight minutes were a political bombshell. By then the claim that the secret women's business was a 'fabrication' had become a national cause célèbre, supported by a group of 'dissident women' among the Ngarrindjeri who denied knowledge of the secret women's business, and the unbuilt bridge had become a symbol of the supposed pandering of the then Keating Labor government to minority causes. According to the academic Marion Maddox, the majority of Milera's comments in the raw footage of the hour-long interview 'seem rather to contradict the fabrication story', but 'Milera produced the right eighty seconds in the hour long interview to lead that evening's broadcasts'.[5]

But the 'fabrication' line had powerful friends. Kenny was at the time a protégé of then editor of the *Adelaide Review* Christopher Pearson (now deceased), who had been running regular stories claiming the 'secret women's business' was a furphy and who used his regular column in the *Australian* to push for a royal commission. He was among a group of prominent conservative activists, such as mining magnate Hugh Morgan, anthropologist Ron Brunton and Liberal MP Ian McLachlan, who were instrumental in turning the Hindmarsh Island affair into a national controversy that would be used as a political wedge in the Liberal Party's 1996 election campaign. After Kenny's interview the local Murdoch newspaper, the *Adelaide Advertiser*, followed up with a headline story, 'The great lie of Hindmarsh

Island'. The following day, pushed along by then opposition leader John Howard, the South Australian Liberal government called a royal commission. The royal commission was duly held, the election fought and won by Howard and his party.

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Australia's culture wars are like a garden of rhizomatous weeds. Every incident is connected underground to other events, to ideas, to people, to institutions, to processes, as if by tendrils. On the night that Kenny's interview with Milera was broadcast, Howard gave his first 'Headland' speech, one of a series designed to shore up his prospects in the coming election. Pearson wrote it. 'For the past 12 years', Howard fulminated, 'Labor has essentially governed by proxy through interest groups' that 'seem to have the ear completely of the government on major issues'. They had 'become the vehicle through which government largesse is delivered'. A 'frustrated mainstream', he said, felt 'utterly powerless to compete with such groups'.[6]

After the election was duly won many involved in the dispute took up positions of power. Morgan was offered a seat on the board of the Reserve Bank, Brunton on the ABC. Pearson was appointed to the National Museum council and the SBS board. A few years later Kenny became an adviser to the South Australian premier, John Olsen. In 2002 he took up a position as media adviser and later chief of staff to then foreign minister Alexander Downer. He later became chief of staff to then opposition leader Malcolm Turnbull. A few years later it was on to the *Australian*. Kenny's book on the Hindmarsh Island affair, published in 1996 and entitled *It would be nice if there was some women's business: The story behind the Hindmarsh Island affair*, later described as 'a breathtakingly one-sided-account',[7] was edited by Pearson and published by Duffy & Snellgrove, a small publisher part-owned by another conservative commentator, Michael Duffy. My point isn't to single out Kenny for criticism. He is one of the more measured right wing commentators. My point is that everything in the culture wars is connected.

A bit more shovelling in this garden leads to the then editor of Kenny's paper, Chris Mitchell (recently retired), who attracted national attention as a culture warrior when as editor of the *Courier-Mail* he published an eight-page exposé of how left-wing historian Manning Clark was a supposed Soviet 'agent of influence'; a claim later shown to be untrue. Mitchell was subsequently moved across to the *Australian*, where he turned a worthy but dull paper into a neoconservative Pravda. Through this period, as former Australian journalist Jim Buckell later wrote, what was once a pluralist paper 'gradually gave way to the thundering of the neoconservatives' and the 'paper began to act more like a propaganda sheet for the right

wing of the Liberal Party than a broad-based sounding board for big ideas and public policy'.[8]

From here the tendrils lead to Rupert Murdoch's NewsCorp empire, with its deep connections to conservative politics in Britain and the United States, and its mastery of divisive populism via its British and Australian tabloids, and in the United States, Foxnews.

One tendril leads from Abyan back to the *Tampa* incident of 2001, when prime minister John Howard reversed longstanding humanitarian traditions first by refusing entry to a ship carrying refugees and shipping them to the newly inaugurated detention centre on Nauru, then by making race an issue in the 2001 election. That campaign was presided over by Lynton Crosby, who was national campaign director for the Liberal Party in 2001 for the *Tampa* election, whose company the Crosby Textor Group provided support for the Liberal Party in its 2013 'stop the boats' campaign, and who worked on the British Conservative Party's divisive, race-coded 2005 election campaign, focused on crime and immigration, and its 2015 election campaign.[9]

It would all make a fantastic conspiracy theory if only it wasn't true.

Abyan was ultimately returned to Australia for medical help and her story disappeared from public view until early May, a day past Mother's Day, when Dutton confirmed that she had delivered her child on Nauru. She joined a queue of vulnerable people who have been made grist for Australia's culture wars: Mamdouh Habib, wrongly held for three years in Guantánamo Bay and other places on suspicion of terror and eventually released without charge; Muhamed Haneef, an Indian doctor wrongly accused of assisting terrorists and held for a month without charge; David Hicks, imprisoned and tortured in Guantánamo Bay for five and a half years on false charges later dropped; Cornelia Rau, a German woman suffering mental illness who was wrongly arrested and imprisoned in a detention centre; Reza Berati, who was killed during a riot on Manus Island in February 2014; Fazel Chegeni, who died on Christmas Island in November 2015. It's a safe bet that soon another name, another story, will join the list. Like Abyan's story theirs will briefly excite national attention and perhaps even national outrage. Like the stories before it, whatever fleeting and sensationalist coverage that story attracts, it almost certainly won't speak directly to how Australia's long-running culture wars have distorted our politics and all the related processes of law, governance and journalism beyond all recognition.

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You say asylum seeker, I say queue jumper; you say Indigenous rights, I say special privileges; you say global warming, I say conspiracy; you say gay marriage, I say unnatural; you say feminism, I say misandry; you say immigration, I say invasion; you say Islamophobia, I say terrorism.

The stock story of the culture wars is well known now: two tribes face off in a war of values: a beleaguered mainstream of ordinary Australians—'battlers', 'middle Australia', 'families'—versus an unrepresentative, all-powerful 'politically correct' 'leftist' 'cultural elite'. Dispatches from the front lines of this battle fill many an opinion column and radio talkback segment. An endless parade of man-hating feminists, queue-jumping asylum seekers, leftist university lecturers, biased ABC journalists, grant-grubbing scientists, handout-addicted Aborigines, and sharia-law-promoting Islamic clerics populate our fevered media imaginations, their stories told with an obsessive-compulsive repetitiveness that creates its own kind of truth. There's barely an issue now that isn't refracted through the lens of the culture wars and presented as a partisan struggle between 'left' and 'right'. Indigenous rights, asylum seekers, gay marriage, the future of public broadcasting, keeping kids safe at school, Islam, even the science of global warming.

But there's a clue in this reductionism. In essence the culture wars are a finely honed media product, packaged and exported by the US right, and marketed through conservative franchises around the world—think tanks, right-leaning media, lobby groups, conservative political parties, partisan pollsters, and the professional purveyors of political division who work as party strategists. The product consists of a narrative template into which names, places and issues can be inserted to suit the occasion, but always the overarching story is the same: a broad-based, powerless 'mainstream' faces off against the outrages perpetrated by an all-powerful left 'elite'. The context in which this product is marketed is the chaos and confusion that marked the end of postwar consensus politics in the late 1970s and that has been ongoing. Its fuel is rage and the sense of dislocation, disruption and insecurity felt by many after decades of economic and cultural change. The solution offered isn't to kick upwards against the entrenched economic power of the rich but to kick downwards against new claimants for rights and inclusion, who are identified as the real cause of the trouble.

This media product is reaching the end of its lifespan now. The conditions that produced the culture wars have begun to change. Economic inequality has become a pressing enough issue to trump the partisan magnification of cultural differences. There's a growing disquiet among many people disturbed by the economic failures and unfairness of the present, dwindling work security, a busted social contract and a growing realisation that, behind the smoke and mirrors of the partisan sideshows that now dominate politics, a heist has been pulled. But

there's still a way to go yet. The end game of the culture wars is getting ugly, as seen in the botched national-security-obsessed prime ministership of Tony Abbott, or the openly racist and sexist populist presidential campaign of Donald Trump, or the rise of race-based political populism and white nationalist parties in Europe.

So, how did we get here?

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Hugh Morgan is a man used to power. From 1990 to 2003 he was CEO of Western Mining Corporation, as was his father before him. He was president of the Business Council of Australia for several years and in 1996 was appointed by the Howard government to the board of the Reserve Bank. In 1983 he helped mastermind the mining industry publicity campaign that would shoot down the Hawke government's proposed Aboriginal land rights legislation.

Morgan also stands near the beginning of Australia's culture wars. He made his political name in May 1984 with a speech he gave at an Australian Mining Industry Council seminar, and which he later claimed 'really got things wheeling' for his causes, not least opposition to Aboriginal land rights. Both capitalism and mining, Morgan said, were 'part of the divine order', and if Aborigines were granted land rights they'd take the opportunity to practise 'infanticide, cannibalism, and … cruel initiation rites'. Evidence for this, Morgan claimed, could be seen in nineteenth-century accounts of 'the partiality of the Aborigines for the particular flavour of the Chinese, who were killed and eaten in large numbers'.[10] Nor did Morgan have any truck with the idea that white Australians had pursued a policy of genocide against Aborigines, which he claimed had been perpetuated by the 'Aboriginal Affairs Industry … to incite resentment and animosity within the Aboriginal community', to 'arouse white middle-class guilt', and to 'create expectations of compensation payments … as atonement for past genocide'. Drawing on research by historian Geoffrey Blainey, Morgan claimed that mercy killings undertaken by traditional Aborigines were far worse than 'any depredations by the Europeans'. The solution, he argued, was 'to treat all Australians equally'.[11]

Already, before Morgan began to speak, the environment was highly charged. Two months earlier Blainey, speaking to members of the Warrnambool Rotary Club and in a subsequent newspaper article, challenged what he called the 'Asianisation' of immigration policy, which he claimed had led to Asians becoming 'a favoured majority' as a result of the 'slow Asian

takeover' of the nation. The pace of Asian immigration, he said, 'was now well ahead of public opinion',[12] and policy was out of step with feelings in the suburbs and workplaces, away from the currents of decision-making and with the 'least access to the Press and radio and television', which were where migrants went to live and competed with locals for jobs amid already high levels of unemployment.[13]If current levels were left unchanged, then the country faced ongoing community unrest that would seriously test the tolerance of Australians. In the wake of Blainey's speech the Hawke government commissioned the Fitzgerald Report, which found unease among Australians with multiculturalism and Asian immigration, prompting the government to tighten immigration policy.

There was nothing particularly original about either of these cannon shots. The rhetoric being used by Morgan had been bought off the rack, so to speak, from the United States, where for almost two decades political warriors had been developing anti-'new class' rhetoric. Blainey's rhetoric echoed that of Enoch Powell, the British Conservative Party maverick whose infamous 1968 'Rivers of Blood' speech against black and Asian immigration ignited the anti-immigration debate in Britain and served as the prototype for the coded anti-immigrant rhetoric Margaret Thatcher would use to help win the prime ministership in 1979.

Before Morgan and Blainey gave their speeches, this anti-'new class' rhetoric had already made its way to Australia in books such as Milojvan Djilas's *The New Class*, published in 1957 and popular among cold war conservatives;[14] in attacks on the emerging women's movement in the late 1960s;[15] in satires such as Alex Buzo's 1981 book *Meet the New Class*[16] and anthologies such as *The New Conservatism in Australia*, a now-forgotten but then important collection of essays published in 1982 and edited by then conservative Robert Manne. In it contributor John Carroll complains about the 'remissive class' of upper middle class intellectuals who have 'been setting the cultural pace since the 1960s', who resemble the US 'new class' and are 'hostile to the values of the "entrepreneurial" or "capitalist" middle class'.[17] Carroll's targets, novel then, are familiar now.

Its members belong to the various professions, including teaching: they occupy the middle and sometimes upper echelons of government bureaucracy, they work in the media, and they include the bulk of the literati, artists and those who administer the arts. In general they are educated to a tertiary level: indeed, the universities have been the seedbeds of remissive culture, which has flowed from them into schools, into the mass media, and into public and private bureaucracies.[18]

The only thing he forgot to mention was the ABC.

But Blainey and Morgan cut through where others hadn't. They put anti-'new class' rhetoric in the headlines. Blainey flexed his talents as a brilliant phrase-maker, able to capture the notion of special interests at work in short, journalism-friendly grabs: 'the "surrender Australia policy", the multicultural "industry", the "nation of tribes", the "black armband" view of history'. It was a talent that, as academic Andrew Markus has said, would be 'significant in shaping the concepts employed in the New Right's battle for moral supremacy'.[19] The rhetoric found its way into the vernacular, and began to change the ways in which debates around causes such as Indigenous rights struggles were framed.

These days this is called the 'dead cat manoeuvre', a method made famous by political strategist Lynton Crosby, which is when you throw a metaphorical 'dead cat onto the table' to reframe the political agenda and distract people from relevant issues. By the mid 1980s no longer was the pressing issue the unfairness of mining industry attacks on Aborigines, it was the titanic battle between 'mainstream and elites'.

The divide is a furphy. As Murray Goot and Tim Rowse showed in their book *Divided Nation: Indigenous Affairs and the Imagined Public*, the mining industry anti–land rights campaigns of the 1980s played an important role in the invention of a set of mythologies about Australian opinion, including the popularisation of the idea of a 'middle Australia' who were against land rights and 'special privileges' for Indigenous Australians. These mythologies nevertheless became standard currency among politicians, journalists, political activists and other opinion makers.[20] They were supported by opinion polls about Aboriginal rights, some of which used emotively phrased or framed questions in language very similar to mining industry anti–land rights advertising campaigns to suggest that Aborigines were asking for privileges not enjoyed by 'other Australians'.[21] The perception, supported by such polls, that public feeling about land rights had changed significantly, helped spook the Hawke government into dropping its national land rights agenda in 1986.

Since the 1980s women, scientists and asylum seekers have all had their day of punishment, sometimes for weeks, sometimes even years. But no group has suffered through Australia's culture wars like Indigenous Australians, year after year, decade after decade, every day, every week, every month since the 'Aboriginal industry' hit the headlines in 1984. Not even asylum seekers, their bodies drowned and bobbing about at sea, whose systematic worldwide abuse ushered in the globalisation of the culture wars, have suffered so many decades of abuse.

Blainey and Morgan kicked off a rolling backlash that continued through the 1980s into the 1990s, from one orchestrated media event to the next. Along the way the culture wars were

industrialised. First there were the bicentenary celebrations of 1988. In recognition that politics was turning cultural, the Institute of Public Affairs retooled itself to produce a non-stop output of economic and cultural commentary targeting the 'new class' and its economic and cultural foibles. Among other moves they recruited Ken Baker, a PhD student of John Carroll, to write a column for their in-house journal the *IPA Review*, called 'Strange Times'. They were regularly republished in the*Australian*. Read now, Baker's columns are dated only in their subject matter. Their rhetorical drive is as current as any column by culture warriors Andrew Bolt or Piers Akerman or Tim Blair.

Morgan was a *Review* regular. As he said in one broadside, 'The major obstacle within Australian society to improving the quality of life of Aborigines is not the pockets of racism that persist, but the guilt industry.'[22]

Next stop was the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. This got underway in 1987, but by the early 1990s conservative anthropologist Ron Brunton, who had been at the forefront of the campaign to discredit Aboriginal opposition to mining claims, was leading a campaign to discredit the commission, a campaign undertaken through the IPA with support from Morgan.[23] After the release of the commission's report in 1991, which found that disproportionate numbers of Aborigines were dying in jail because they were 11 times more likely to be jailed than non-Aborigines, mostly for trivial offences, Brunton wrote a short book published by the IPA in which he argued that the findings of the commission perpetuated the myth 'that people are disadvantaged simply because of their Aboriginal identity'.[24]

Meanwhile Morgan's off-sider at Western Mining, Ray Evans, was busy founding organisations dedicated to conservative causes. These included the HR Nicholls Society, founded by Evans with John Stone, Peter Costello and Barry Purvis, to fight against workplace regulation and marketise employer–employee relations; the Galatians Group, founded to oppose the supposed pro-Aboriginal left-wing bias of churches; and later the Bennelong Society, formed to push for the return of assimilationism as the centrepiece of Indigenous affairs.

In the 1970s Morgan had tipped $40,000 into founding the conservative think tank the Centre for Independent Studies.[25] The point of funding think tanks, he later said, was to 'reshape the political agenda' and 'change public opinion',[26] because 'Politicians only accept what is in public opinion polls, so we have to change public opinion.'[27]

Before long the rhetoric seeped into party-political discourse.

The Liberal Party's 1988 policy manifesto 'Future Directions' is mostly half-remembered as a political punchline about the vanilla suburban house with a white picket fence that graced its cover. According to the document, which then prime ministerial aspirant John Howard played a part in producing, once elected the party would build 'one nation' to celebrate the 'core values which unite us as Australians' by repudiating 'sectional interests' so as to create 'one Australian community and one nation again and to put behind us the growing unfairness and divisions of the last six years'. Multicultural and Aboriginal programs, the document argued, discouraged people from participating 'in the mainstream of Australian life'.[28]

While all this was going on we learned a new expression: 'political correctness'. Lacking the irony of 'ideologically unsound', the self-directed leftist criticism that it displaced, the term started appearing in Australian newspapers in the early 1990s and according to a content analysis its usage reached a peak in 1996.[29] Designed to discredit social movements, the term encapsulates the core free-market idea that social movements are a fraud and harks back to a world before mobility, before minority groups demanded, quite rightly, to be respected.

But the culture wars were never simply about culture, or even about opportunistic 'wedge politics'. They were always in essence about two different economic philosophies. On the one hand those under attack for their 'new class' 'political correctness' represent a postwar consensus politics that puts government at the heart of the economy. They are 'rent seekers' who would rather seek redress from government than test their hand in the market, and who pursue forms of 'group rights' at odds with entrepreneurial individualism. On the other hand those doing the attacking are almost universally economic libertarians, in favour of removing support for the disadvantaged, and who quite literally seek to 'change the culture' to one where rational self-interest will do the work of economic and social redistribution.

In other words, the culture wars are an artefact of the ascension of neoliberalism. They belong to a world where the idea of political freedom has been tied to the idea of market freedom. And where freedom is defined in negative terms as 'freedom from' all forms of regulation, rather than positive liberty, where freedom is defined as freedom 'to do'—the freedom created when governments support people through universal health or education systems, or through mechanisms to end patterns of systemic disadvantage.

Even the form of racism in play is neoliberal. That is, it is a racism based on a notion of false equality that pretends to do without the idea of race. By this formulation even the very

mention of racism is itself racist. This is the thrust behind Morgan's assertion in 1984 that the only way forward in the race debate was 'to treat all Australians equally'. It's behind Blainey's assertion that the Wik judgment was unacceptable because it made special concessions to one particular racial group,[30] and behind the then Liberal government's view that the judgment treated people 'unequally',[31] and behind Howard's assertion that multicultural and Aboriginal programs, on the other hand, discouraged people from participating 'in the mainstream of Australian life'.

It's a clever rhetorical ploy, as if the pursuit of justice is a kind of corrupt separatism and there is no history of injustice to reflect on. We could all instead be 'colour-blind', a term that appears to aspire to equality but under which histories of dispossession are erased, along with claims for racialised justice. The fault in the logic is obvious. Genuine anti-racism attacks injustice. Purveyors of neoliberal 'colour-blind' racism turn a blind eye to the ways in which groups are disadvantaged on racial grounds but heap scorn on their collective attempts to seek justice.

Next stop, Mabo. This 1992 High Court case recognised the claims of the Meriam people to land on Murray Island. But that wasn't the bombshell. The judgment overturned the doctrine of terra nullius by which Australia had been declared untenured land on white settlement. Morgan was quick out of the blocks. He argued that the judgment 'put at risk … the whole legal framework of property rights throughout the whole community'.[32] The imputation was that the rights of ordinary Australians over land they owned was at risk, which it wasn't. Not only that, the judgment was racist because it meant different treatment for different groups and as another conservative, John Stone, said, violated the principle of the 'level playing field'. The judges were characterised as 'Aboriginal industry spokesmen'.[33]

Into this hothouse walks Pauline Hanson. She was one of two political Frankenstein monsters produced by Australia's culture wars. Running first as a Liberal but disendorsed by the party during the 1996 election campaign, she won the seat of Ipswich as an independent. Hanson then positioned herself as the consummate populist outsider—a fish-and-chip woman from Ipswich. But her campaign was orchestrated by political insiders. She, too, sang the tune about 'political correctness' and the 'Aboriginal industry', but added a tilt for the local, the parochial, the national, and against global flows in all their forms: of money, of jobs, of people. It was hardly surprising that Howard failed to repudiate her. She was the monster his culture wars created.

Then came Hindmarsh Island, a dispute tailor-made for Australia's culture wars. The controversy was effective as a political tool because it leveraged existing perceptions and

played to longstanding stereotypes about the unreliability of Aborigines. As the journalist Margaret Simons wrote in her definitive book on the affair, 'The finding of the Hindmarsh Island Royal Commission has echoed through Australian life since—in every controversy about Aboriginal land claims, and every discussion about the claims of pre-settlement history on the present.'[34] Then Liberal Party federal director Andrew Robb later revealed his party's strategy:

We rode it [Hindmarsh Island] very hard. It was a clear wedge issue for Labor. Tickner [Labor Aboriginal Affairs minister] was obsessed with holding the socially progressive agenda and so he held onto it. But the more he held on, the more he alienated Labor's blue-collar base. They wedged themselves. And the more we pursued it, the more it divided them.[35]

The Hawke–Keating government did the economic reform. Howard did the cultural mopping up. And spun it into electoral gold.

Along the way there were two diversions from the hearty decade-long round of Aboriginal bashing. The first was triggered by the publication of Helen Garner's *The First Stone,* which charged that the disgraced master of a Melbourne University college had been victim of a feminist conspiracy. What was supposedly sexual harassment, Garner argued, was no such thing but was 'victim feminism', an overreaction by young women who had been egged on by their feminist mentors to take the case to the police when it could have otherwise been sensibly resolved. A conspiracy was afoot, orchestrated by 'politically correct' elites at the expense of common sense, personified by the ordinary battling college master.

It was a beautiful story and sold a lot of books. But 'victim feminism', too, was a term imported from the US culture wars and the work of bestselling authors such as Katie Roiphe and Camille Paglia. And there was no conspiracy. It turned out the complainants hadn't gone 'straight to the police' but had first sought redress through the college. And that they went to the police on legal advice, not because of spurious advice from a vengeful sisterhood. And that the 'feminist conspiracy' line was possible only because Garner had split the complainant's main defender in the college into seven different people on legal advice.

The second diversion was the realisation that a novel called *The Hand that Signed the Paper*, written by a young woman called Helen Demidenko, which had won three national awards for literature, was anti-Semitic. In it Demidenko repeated the old lie, itself a product of Nazi propaganda, that Bolsheviks who persecuted Ukrainians in the lead-up to the Second World War were Jewish—a line she used to justify why her supposed Ukrainian ancestors, as depicted in the book, had worked in concentration camps. Then the story unravelled. There

were no Ukrainian ancestors. Demidenko was an Englishwoman, real name Helen Darville. And parts of the book turned out to have been plagiarised.

By now the national temperature was so high that even the old cultural left were crossing over and learning to sing the latest conservative tune. But it wasn't just about the 'new class', or even that old standard 'political correctness', it was about the supposed 'victim mentality' alleged to be found most of all among the young. Joining Garner in the hum-fest against youth were other scions of the Whitlam generation, who moved their chips red squares to black and who now made it their business to complain long and hard about how the 'politically correct' foibles of the oversensitive young were sending the culture off the rails. Never mind that young people were at the beginning of a long slide into what we now call 'precarity', many of them (though of course not all) burdened by education debt, locked in low-paid casualised work, shut out of the housing market by record real estate prices. As with Indigenous people, women and ethnic minorities, a new logic was afoot. Disadvantaged social groups would no longer have a claim on government. Instead they would be treated as individuals, assessed for their 'worthiness' and 'deservedness', and generally found wanting.

After the 1996 election it was back to Aborigine bashing. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Commission was downgraded. The native title claim brought by the Wik people of Arnhem Land was repudiated. *Bringing Them Home*, the stolen generations report, was denigrated. In every case the pile on involved at least some of the same old team: Ron Brunton, Christopher Pearson, Andrew Bolt, Ray Evans, Michael Duffy, Piers Akerman and P.P. McGuinness.[36]

Then, suddenly, everything changed. The culture wars, like so much else, were offshored.

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When the two planes hit the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City on 11 September 2001, the culture wars went global. Insider targets were set aside for outsider targets. The culture wars entered a new phase in their life as a media product. Almost overnight we found a new group to hate; one prefigured in the ancient stereotype of the swarthy Arab, but now with a bomb in hand. The horrific forces in play in the United States that day, or since in the Bali bombing, or the bombings in France, aren't to be underestimated. But as a political tool they have played and played and played.

In Australia we had a warm-up act prior to the changeover to the new rules of the game. The arrival of the MV Tampa at Christmas Island with its cargo of unwanted refugees marked a new phase in the denigration of democratic institutions. Shonky one-sided royal commissions, the smearing of reputations and destruction of careers of those deemed to be political opponents, and victim-blaming of the relatively powerless, were all by now relatively routine. Tampa gave us the spectacle of longstanding international conventions being flouted. Territories were excised from the migration zone. People were sent to offshore hellholes. The story told was that this was to save their lives. It begged the question: if so then why not simply rescue them? The narrative about life-saving served to justify a process of turning asylum seekers into a punitive spectacle; a ruse made possible because its victims are 'other'. Unmitigated cruelty is no solution to anything.

That's not to say that Indigenous Australia was off the hook. Instead, they were warehoused. The release of the *Little Children Are Sacred* report, which showed horrific instances of child abuse in some Indigenous communities, was used as a pretext for the military 'Intervention' in the Northern Territory's Aboriginal communities. The militarised lockdown hadn't been recommended by the report and according to its authors didn't address any of its 97 recommendations.[37] But it did provide the right imagery of Indigenous people being brought to heel.

Kevin Rudd would later say 'sorry' to the stolen generations, but the symbolism of the Intervention was something the subsequent Rudd and Gillard governments were happy to play along with. It was almost as if Indigenous people had outlived their usefulness as a pawn in the culture wars and were being put 'on hold' while the focus shifted elsewhere. The new vernacular of Indigenous affairs that followed, centred on the notion of 'closing the gap', as the academic Jon Altman has argued, ushered in a new paternalism that sits within a punitive neoliberal framework that seeks to differentiate worthy from unworthy, and that has found bipartisan support in Canberra.[38] Even as it focused on entirely practical outcomes (and failed to achieve them), the idea that Indigenous struggles involve more than simple practicalities was batted away.

But by then the culture wars had turned Labor into a 'me-too' party on social issues. The party has been almost fatally hollowed out by the prevailing notion that to win marginal seats you have to show you are capable of great cruelty.

Pivotal to these efforts was a corps of ultra-conservative commentators whose influence grew through the 1990s and into the 2000s—Paul Sheehan (lately suspended from his paper for reporting unfounded racist allegations), the omnipresent Andrew Bolt, Miranda Devine, Piers

Akerman, Tim Blair, Chris Kenny, and recently Rita Panahi—whose often well-remunerated profession is to keep telling their audiences that the real problems with the nation can be traced back to the ABC, Aborigines, immigrants, Muslims and feminists. Differences in style aside, they have in common a black-and-white view of the world with little room for nuance, compromise or finding common ground. Seldom have any of them offered any creative or constructive contribution to national discourse. Their stock in trade is negativity and anger, their role to attack, tear down and impugn perceived partisan enemies. They are haters who accuse others of hatred, an elite who accuse others of elitism, purveyors of groupthink who accuse others of groupthink, defenders of individualism who practise the basest forms of political tribalism.

Women's issues, too, had by then been more or less systematically marginalised. Anne Summers has shown how, from the mid 1990s onwards, 30 years of institutional support for women was wound back, beginning in the last years of the Keating prime ministership and accelerated with the election of the Howard government in 1996. She documents how in Keating's last term hard heads in the party insisted that women, too, should be treated as a 'special interest' to which Labor shouldn't pander. With Howard's election childcare funding was slashed and organisations such as the Office of the Status of Women, among many others, were defunded.39 It was later calculated that more women were driven out of work by childcare cutbacks in just two Sydney suburbs, Liverpool and Fairfield, than the 1500 jobs lost amid a national furore when the BHP steelworks closed down in 1999.[40]

Women today still earn only about 80 per cent of what men earn, are the main victims of domestic violence, are underrepresented in every realm of politics and hold less than 10 per cent of management roles or senior board positions in business. Yet women who take up prominent leadership positions are often vilified—witness the abuse heaped on prominent women such as prime minister Julia Gillard and Sydney Lord Mayor Clover Moore, or the gratuitous media fascination with the private life of Peta Credlin—and those who raise feminist concerns routinely find themselves targeted on social media, sometimes in the culture wars language of 'special privileges' unjustly being sought, sometimes threats of rape. So much so that the feminist Susan Carland, who also receives abuse because she is a Muslim, and who donates a dollar to charity for every abusive tweet she receives, is more than a thousand dollars poorer for her trouble.

At the same time, as Eleanor Robertson has eloquently argued in this magazine, the prevailing model of feminism has too often become a liberal model,

characterised by its naturalisation of Enlightenment values: individual choice, meritocracy, autonomy, progress, the emancipatory power of technology and an acceptance of the basic structures of capitalist social organisation … a self-help philosophy that is typified by Facebook chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg's 2013 book Lean In, which attributes women's difficulty achieving career advancement to their docile, people-pleasing socialisation.[41]

What Robertson describes isn't so much liberal feminism as neoliberal feminism, conducted in an environment where real structural change is off the agenda and all politics is personal politics, not the politics of group action and rights.

The work of denigrating the rights of disadvantaged groups more or less done, through the first decade of the 2000s culture warriors turned their attention away from a traditional target of the culture wars—university arts faculties, those hotbeds of victim feminism, youthful political correctness and professorial unintelligibility—towards science faculties. In particular, climate change scientists. Even science, by now, was being recast to fit the culture wars template. No longer to be understood as a matter of empirical evidence, it was relativised as a matter of left versus right (the same relativism they accused humanities faculties of).

It was a very up-and-down debate. First conservatives derided global warming as a hoax. Then they hit on the idea that it was happening, but a result of natural forces, not human-made forces. Never mind that simple, basic science shows that CO2 and other global-warming gasses are atmospheric insulators.

Then they decided global warming had 'paused', all because one year, 1998, was hotter than quite a few subsequent years, so if you drew a line across from that year to the next really hot year, well, it looked kind of flat. Never mind that the trend across all years apart from the 1998 outlier was upwards. Oh, wait, then they decided that the line from 1998 descended a little bit. Oh, guess what, the planet is actually 'cooling'. But hang on a minute. All the data is actually fabricated! Look, here's a measuring station near a volcano. And the ice is coming back at the South Pole. And they grew grapes in England once. And Greenland was called that for a reason! And it was cold and wet last week! And on it went. All played out to the same old tune. A conspiracy was afoot. Grant-grubbing scientists, thousands of them, had conspired in a grand hoax to bleed taxpayers dry.

The regular team was at work sowing doubt, spreading counterarguments about conspiracies among self-interested elites. In his book *Scorcher* Clive Hamilton tells of how Morgan, along with former WMC executive and long-time collaborator Ray Evans, a fellow global warming sceptic, was instrumental in getting the Howard government to hold back on cutting carbon emissions.[42] Environmentalism, Morgan declared in the early 1990s, is 'a religious movement of the most primitive kind'.[43] In 1999 he and Evans founded yet another organisation, the Lavoisier Group, dedicated to undermining 'climate extremism'. Evans, meanwhile, globetrotted back and forth to meetings of US climate change denialist organisations such as the Cooler Heads Foundation, funded by Exxon to try to discredit the science—even as their own research at the time showed climate change was real.44 The *Australian* under Chris Mitchell took on a role as climate denialist journal of first recourse, abetted by the tribal conservatives of the News Corp tabloids.

The second Frankenstein monster produced by the culture wars was Tony Abbott. If John Howard's government used the culture wars opportunistically, Abbott's was defined by them. It was a mean-spirited government, characterised by its vendettas against perceived enemies on the wrong side of the culture wars such as treasury secretary Martin Parkinson, who had headed the previous government's department of climate change (since reinstated in another role in the Turnbull government); President of the Human Rights Commission Gillian Triggs, who was subjected to ongoing attacks for daring to speak out against the imprisonment of children in asylum centres; and Save the Children, which had advocated for the human rights of asylum seekers—and its simplistic 'three word slogans' focused on refugees and asylum seekers. Unable to govern for the future, Abbott governed for the past as if through the warped political imagination of his hero and indefatigable culture warrior over decades, B.A. Santamaria. He governed not for the people but for extreme conservatives in the Liberal Party and their media cheerleaders, who have similarly defined the government of Malcolm Turnbull.

At one level the culture wars represent a clash of the margins. In the new world of global economic flows the working-class and middle-class people who have most suffered as a result of the economic restructuring of the West are being played off against the displaced, the mobile and the impoverished of so-called developing nations. The wages, conditions and rights of the 'first world' and those of the 'developing world' are being adjusted in the interests of a wealthy global elite. This is taking place at a time when, also because of globalisation, national governments have less power than ever. The symbolic politics of the culture wars, with their relentless focus on sovereignty, borders and the lost privileges of the many, are a proxy for an economic power governments no longer have. The culture wars, with all their smoke and mirrors, their sideshows and flashes of bright light, belong to a world

that is barely governable. The political levers no longer quite connect. Nations in the West have to some extent become militarised shells, scattered with remnants of limping, cash-starved government services, defined by their hollowed-out, divided public spheres and their ability to police borders and punish outliers, their fortunes determined by global markets and the truisms of libertarian economics.

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Culture wars end when new social settlements are made.

On YouTube there is a video, shot in 2003, of current US presidential nominee Bernie Sanders dressing down the then chairman of the US Federal Reserve Alan Greenspan, an ultra free-market conservative then lauded as the 'maestro' of the US economy. Sanders brutally but effectively takes Greenspan to task for the gap between his lofty pronouncements of the supposed success of the US economy and the reality felt by ordinary people. At one point he tells Greenspan, 'You just don't know what is going wrong in the real world.'[45] Sanders' attack anticipated the global financial crisis by five years. Dismissive at the time, Greenspan later conceded his former views were flawed. Everywhere now, the realities of economic inequality and the chronic precarity felt by people are starting to overshadow the culture wars.

The old nostrums no longer work. This is no longer the age of Milton Friedman, it is the age of Thomas Piketty. In the United States real wages have stagnated for decades. The working-class votes that conservatives stole with their divisive cultural politics are quite literally starting to want their money back. Politicians can no longer credibly talk about free markets and low-to-middle-income families in the same breath. Young people are supporting 'outsider' candidates such as Sanders in his run for the Democratic nomination who speak an older fashioned language of economic redistribution and social justice. Conservatives, meanwhile, have turned away from the Republican establishment to support Donald Trump.

Trump, a bellicose populist demagogue who parades his racism and sexism as a badge of honour, amassed popular appeal in part because he also spoke to the economic anxieties felt by many. Promising not to tamper with social security, he sent a message that he understood that lower class Americans feel left out and betrayed by a Republican Party establishment that is only able to speak the language of economic straightening.

Versions of our modern-day culture wars have been played out at least since the eighteenth century when the philosophers Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke disagreed about the meaning of the French Revolution. Where Kant saw the flourishing of new ideals, rights and prospects for Enlightenment, Burke, the sceptic, saw old orders being torn down and the ground being laid for meaningless political abstractions and new forms of brutality and chaos. All our culture wars since have been about the nature of freedom, the question of ownership, the distribution of resources, the role of tradition and the debate on individual versus collective rights.

But what if the old divides no longer hold? No-one (with the possible exception of Slavoj Zizek) looks to collectivism as a panacea for everything any more. And it has become equally clear to all but a lunatic fringe of fanatics—the rusted-on libertarian set doodling away on their dog-eared copies of Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*—that neoliberal capitalism is a fatally destructive force for all but a class of super-rich. And even they will be hard-pressed to find a new planet to buy when this one is done. Already the contours are forming of a new politics that has increasingly displaced traditional party politics. As the accumulation of corporate wealth at the top turns criminal, so a consensus for change is emerging in the broad middle.

There is widespread popular agreement, for example, that market capitalism, for all its flaws, is the least worst system. But agreement, too, that capitalism needs to be managed and ameliorated. Wealth has not 'trickled down' as the proponents of neoliberalism said it would. As the political scientist Robert Reich has shown, in the United States, where ideological gains of the libertarian far right have been strongest, personal wage and salary income has fallen as a percentage of gross domestic product.[46]Unfettered capitalism, as economist Thomas Piketty conclusively shows, leads to the rich getting richer. Growing inequality as a result of unfettered free-market capitalism, as Guy Standing has shown, has created a new global 'precariat'. There is anger, too, at the concentration of corporate power and the closeness of corporate power to governments. It seems equally clear that old-fashioned welfare states simply don't work, but that governments nevertheless need to play a role in redistributing opportunity and wealth through provision of services such as health care and education, and minimal but adequate welfare for those genuinely in need.

It seems no less obvious that Western history contains many blights. Indigenous people have historically been wronged, immigrants have been demonised and marginalised, and these are things that can be fixed. Common sense tells us that the planet is warming, that we can't go on polluting, and that if we do so there is a risk of ongoing irreversible destruction. Yet the price of doing something is considerably less than the price of not acting.[47] Like everything

else here, the solution is to turn away from the destructive, anti-democratic unfettered free-market track we have been on, towards a managed democratic capitalism.

People are looking for new, constructive solutions, not old-fashioned ideological warfare. The time for partisan games is over.

So far as the culture wars go, even the warriors who started it all now take a more reflective, constructive view. In the early 2000s Hugh Morgan sought to heal old wounds and surprised Aboriginal and environment movement leaders by courting them to join Western Mining in an advisory capacity.[48] In 2015 Geoffrey Blainey reassessed his own legacy and said 'I can see parts of our history with fresh eyes', including Indigenous history.[49]

In the meantime, the wreckage of the culture wars lies everywhere. Around 3000 people are now held prisoner in Australian detention centres, most of them for no reason other than the political spectacle of their punishment.[50] Indigenous people are still at the very bottom of the pile in Australian society, yet are being kicked around as if they were at the top. As I write, I hear that a ten-year-old girl committed suicide. As the actor and writer Nakkiah Lui said, responding to the loss, 'I don't know how to put into words how incredibly worthless this country can make Aboriginal people feel.'[51]On their website Crosby–Textor advertise their ability to 'apply the sophisticated market research tools proven in consumer marketing and political battles'.[52] In their blogs and columns figures such as Andrew Bolt, Miranda Devine, Piers Akerman, Tim Blair and Chris Kenny continue their war on asylum seekers, the ABC, the stolen generations and climate science. None of this is comfortable. It speaks to a world of bullying and unnecessary hurt that over three decades has become a national habit. But nor can this be the future.

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