

The Australia Institute

Research that matters.

TITLE: The Australian: “We didn’t mean it. Really”

AUTHOR: Clive Hamilton

PUBLICATION: Crikey

PUBLICATION DATE: 18/02/08

After serving enthusiastically as the leading organ of John Howard’s culture wars, the advent of a Labor Government has seen The Australian desperately searching for a means of retaining some credibility and influence in the new dispensation.

For those who experienced the vituperation of the newspaper’s phalanx of right-wing commentators and editorialists, the contortions and back-flips of the Murdoch flagship have provided daily entertainment. The admixture of amusement and wonder at the newspaper’s predicament peaked with Saturday’s editorial in the Weekend Australian which moved seamlessly from sinking the boot into the left to calling for more civility in public debate.

The leader laid out the new political strategy designed to rewrite eleven years of right-wing dogmatism by the paper that dubs itself “The Heart of the Nation” (and which others have taken to calling “The A-se of the Nation”).

The strategy has two contradictory elements. From the moment it became plain that Labor would win the election, The Australian began to argue that a Rudd victory is in fact a victory for Howard. Rudd is not only a fiscal conservative, the paper maintains, but a “church-going, family-values social conservative”. He has so much in common with Howard that, despite appearances, the victory of Rudd is another defeat for the left.

Rudd Labor’s dramatic early breaks from Howard over Kyoto and the apology are, in the plastic minds of The Australian’s editors, no grounds for celebration because they are mere symbols within broader moderate policies that eschew the demands of the left. Being moderate and reasonable itself, the newspaper can endorse these sensible moves.

Of course, to endorse Kyoto and the apology, which they violently opposed under Howard, the editors have each had to swallow a forgetfulness potion. But no matter; for a paper that takes itself so seriously, The Australian’s hypocrisy has always had a special pungency.

In their hearts, however, the newspaper’s ideological warriors do not believe the story they tell their readers, which necessitates the second element of the strategy — a call for a new spirit of reconciliation and the restoration of civility to the national discourse.

In this, they are reminiscent of a group of bovver boys with steel-capped boots covered in blood who, after their victim pulls a gun, say “hey, let’s be reasonable and talk it through”. After years of vilifying those they deem enemies, The Australian ’s editors now declare that they can “respect our opponents even when we disagree with their ideas”.

Among their enemies, the editors of The Australian reserve a special loathing for Robert Manne. When they talk about “the left” they are usually thinking of the former editor of Quadrant . Much of the blood on their boots is his. Manne is all the more infuriating because he has never been cowed by them. Unlike others who have understandably withered under the newspaper’s sledging, Australia’s foremost public intellectual has never mentally disintegrated.

The explanation for The Australian ’s Manne-hating is not hard to divine: his mode of public discourse is everything the newspaper’s is not – reasoned rather than dogmatic, eloquent rather than rancorous, urbane rather than cruel. In short, his moral integrity enrages the bovver boys at The Australian because it makes them feel ashamed.

After all, they were once young journalists with ideals.

Humbled by the new spirit of reconciliation, The Australian in its leader admitted, with masterful understatement, “we have not been above the odd ad hominem attack ourselves”.

Perhaps they were thinking of Mick Dodson who had dared to have a different opinion on Aboriginal housing policy. In September 2005, The Australian ran a front-page picture of his Canberra house claiming that he wanted to deny other Aborigines the chance to live the comfortable life he enjoys. Dodson said he feared for the safety of his children.

The “odd ad hominem attack” has taken the form of defamatory accusations designed to destroy reputations. When Howard ruled, The Australian ’s editorial team could bray about their latest foray into character assassination. Rudd now rules but, hey, we can all forgive and forget, can’t we?