

Power, propaganda and conscience

I am a reporter, who values bearing witness. That is to say, I place paramount importance in the evidence of what I see, and hear, and sense to be the truth, or as close to the truth as possible. By comparing this evidence with the statements, and actions of those with power, I believe it's possible to assess fairly how our world is controlled and divided, and manipulated – and how language and debate are distorted and a false consciousness developed.

When we speak of this in regard to totalitarian societies and dictatorships, we call it brainwashing: the conquest of minds. It's a notion we almost never apply to our own societies. Let me give you an example. During the height of the cold war, a group of Soviet journalists were taken on an official tour of the United States. They watched TV; they read the newspapers; they listened to debates in Congress. To their astonishment, everything they heard was more or less the same. The news was the same. The opinions were the same, more or less. "How do you do it?" they asked their hosts. "In our country, to achieve this, we throw people in prison; we tear out their fingernails. Here, there's none of that? What's your secret?"

The secret is that the question is almost never raised. Or if it is raised, it's more than likely dismissed as coming from the margins: from voices far outside the boundaries of what I would call our 'metropolitan conversation', whose terms of reference, and limits, are fixed by the media at one level, and by the discourse or silence of scholarship at another level. Behind both is a presiding corporate and political power.

A dozen years ago, I reported from East Timor, which was then occupied by the Indonesian dictatorship of General Suharto. I had to go there under cover, as reporters were not welcome – my informants were brave, ordinary people who confirmed, with their evidence and experience, that genocide had taken place in their country. I brought out meticulously hand-written documents, evidence that

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whole communities had been slaughtered – all of which we now know to be true.

We also know that vital material backing for a crime proportionally greater than the killing in Cambodia under Pol Pot had come from the West: principally the United States, Britain and Australia. On my return to London, and then to this country, I encountered a very different version. The media version was that General Suharto was a benign leader, who ran a sound economy and was a close ally. Indeed, prime minister Keating was said to regard him as a father figure.

He and Foreign Minister Gareth Evans made many laudatory speeches about Suharto, never mentioning – not once – that he had seized power as a result of what the CIA called “one of the worst massacres of the twentieth century.” Nor did they mention that his special forces, known as Kopassus, were responsible for the terror and deaths of a quarter of the East Timorese population – 200,000 people, a figure confirmed in a study commissioned by the Foreign Affairs Committee of Federal Parliament.

Nor did they mention that these killers were trained by the Australian SAS not far from this auditorium, and that the Australian military establishment was integrated into Suharto’s violent campaign against the people of East Timor.

The evidence of atrocities, which I reported in my film *Death of a Nation* was heard and accepted by the Human Rights Commission of the United Nations, but not by those with power in Australia. When I showed evidence of a second massacre near the Santa Cruz cemetery in November 1991, the foreign editor of the only national newspaper in this country, *The Australian*, mocked the eyewitnesses.

“The truth,” wrote Greg Sheridan, “is that even genuine victims frequently concoct stories.” The paper’s Jakarta correspondent, Patrick Walters, wrote that “no one is arrested [by Suharto] without proper legal procedures”. The editor-in-chief, Paul Kelly, declared Suharto a “moderate” and that there was no alternative to his benign rule.

Paul Kelly sat on the board of the Australia-Indonesia Institute, a body funded by the Australian government. Not long before Suharto was overthrown by his own people, Kelly was in Jakarta, standing at Suharto’s side, introducing the mass murderer to a line of Australian editors. To his great credit, the then editor of the *West Australian*, Paul Murray, refused to join this obsequious group.

Not long ago, Paul Kelly was given a special award in the annual Walkley Awards for journalism – the kind they give to elder statesmen. And no one said anything about Indonesia and Suharto. Imagine a similar award going to Geoffrey Dawson, editor of the *London Times* in the 1930s. Like Kelly, he appeased a

JOHN PILGER | POWER, PROPAGANDA & CONSCIENCE

genocidal dictator, calling him a “moderate”.

This episode is a metaphor for what I’d like to touch upon tonight.

For 15 years, a silence was maintained by the Australian government, the Australian media and Australian academics on the great crime and tragedy of East Timor. Moreover, this was an extension of the silence about the true circumstances of Suharto’s bloody ascent to power in the mid-sixties. It was not unlike the official silence in the Soviet Union on the bloody invasion of Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

The media’s silence I’ll discuss in a while. Let’s look now at the academic silence. One of the greatest acts of genocide in the second half of the twentieth century apparently did not warrant a single substantial academic case study, based on primary sources. Why? We have to go back to the years immediately after world war two when the study of post-war international politics, known as “liberal realism”, was invented in the United States, largely with the sponsorship of those who designed American global economic power. They include the Ford, Carnegie and Rockefeller Foundations, the OSS, the forerunner of the CIA, and the Council on Foreign Relations.

Thus, in the great American universities, scholars generally served to justify the cold war – which, we now know from declassified files, not only brought us closer to nuclear war than we thought, but was itself largely bogus. As the British files now make clear, there was no Soviet threat to the world. The threat was to Russia’s satellites, just as the United States threatened, invaded and controlled its satellites in Latin America.

“Liberal realism” – in America, Britain, Australia – meant taking the humanity out of the study of nations and viewing the world in terms of its usefulness to western power. This was presented in a self-serving jargon: a masonic-like language in thrall to the dominant power. Typical of the jargon were labels.

Of all the labels applied to me, the most interesting is that I am ‘neo-idealist’. The ‘neo’ but has yet to be explained. I should add here that the most hilarious label is the creation of the foreign editor of The Australian who took a whole page in his newspaper to say that a subversive movement called Chomskyist-Pilgerism was inspiring would-be terrorists throughout the world.

During the 1990s, whole societies were laid out for autopsy and identified as “failed states” and “rogue states”, requiring “humanitarian intervention”. Other euphemisms became fashionable – “good governance” and “third way” were adopted by the liberal realist school, which handed out labels to its heroes. Bill Clinton, the president who destroyed the last of the Roosevelt reforms, was

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labelled “left of centre”.

Noble words like democracy, freedom, independence, reform were emptied of their meaning and taken into the service of the World Bank, the IMF and that amorphous thing called “The West” – in other words, imperialism.

Of course, imperialism was the word the realists dared not write or speak, almost as if it had been struck from the dictionary. And yet imperialism was the ideology behind their euphemisms. And need I remind you of the fate of people under imperialism. Throughout 20th century imperialism, the authorities of Britain, Belgium and France gassed, bombed and massacred indigenous populations from Sudan to Iraq, Nigeria to Palestine, India to Malaya, Algeria to the Congo. And yet imperialism only got its bad name when Hitler decided he, too, was an imperialist.

So, after the war, new concepts had to be invented, indeed a whole lexicon and discourse created, as the new imperial superpower, the United States, didn't wish to be associated with the bad old days of European power. The American cult of anti-communism filled this void most effectively; however, when the Soviet Union suddenly collapsed and the cold war was over, a new threat had to be found.

At first, there was the “war on drugs” – and the Bogeyman Theory of History is still popular. But neither can compare with the “war on terror” which arrived with September 11, 2001. Last year, I reported the “war on terror” from Afghanistan. Like East Timor, events I witnessed bore almost no relation to the way they were represented in free societies, especially Australia.

The American attack on Afghanistan in 2001 was reported as a liberation. But the evidence on the ground is that, for 95 per cent of the people, there is no liberation. The Taliban have been merely exchanged for a group of American funded warlords, rapists, murderers and war criminals – terrorists by any measure: the very people whom President Carter secretly armed and the CIA trained for almost 20 years.

One of the most powerful warlords is General Rashid Dostum. General Dostum was visited by Donald Rumsfeld, the US Defence Secretary, who came to express his gratitude. He called the general a “thoughtful” man and congratulated him on his part in the war on terror. This is the same General Dostum in whose custody 4,000 prisoners died terrible deaths just over two years ago – the allegations are that wounded men were left to suffocate and bleed to death in containers. Mary Robinson, when she was the UN's senior humanitarian representative, called for an inquiry; but there was none for this kind of acceptable terrorism. The general is the face of the new Afghanistan you don't see in the media.

JOHN PILGER | POWER, PROPAGANDA & CONSCIENCE

What you see is the urbane Harmid Karzai, whose writ barely extends beyond his 42 American bodyguards. Only the Taliban seem to excite the indignation of our political leaders and media. Yet under the new, approved regime, women still wear the burqua, largely because they fear to walk down the street. Girls are routinely abducted, raped, murdered.

Like the Suharto dictatorship, these warlords are our official friends, whereas the Taliban were our official enemies. The distinction is important, because the victims of our official friends are worthy of our care and concern, whereas the victims of our official enemies are not. That is the principle upon which totalitarian regimes run their domestic propaganda. And that, basically, is how western democracies, like Australia, run theirs.

The difference is that in totalitarian societies, people take for granted that their governments lie to them: that their journalists are mere functionaries, that their academics are quiet and complicit. So people in these countries adjust accordingly. They learn to read between the lines. They rely on a flourishing underground. Their writers and playwrights write coded works, as in Poland and Czechoslovakia during the cold war.

A Czech friend, a novelist, told me; “You in the West are disadvantaged. You have your myths about freedom of information, but you have yet to acquire the skill of deciphering: of reading between the lines. One day, you will need it.”

That day has come. The so-called war on terror is the greatest threat to all of us since the most dangerous years of the cold war. Rapacious, imperial America has found its new “red scare”. Every day now, officially manipulated fear and paranoia are exported to our shores – air marshals, finger printing, a directive on how many people can queue for the toilet on a Qantas jet flying to Los Angeles.

The totalitarian impulses that have long existed in America are now in full cry. Go back to the 1950s, the McCarthy years, and the echoes today are all too familiar – the hysteria; the assault on the Bill of Rights; a war based on lies and deception. Just as in the 1950s, the virus has spread to America’s intellectual satellites, notably Australia.

Last week, the Australian government announced it would implement US-style immigration procedures, fingerprinting people when they arrived. The Sydney Morning Herald reported this as government measures to “tighten its anti-terrorism net”. No challenge there; no scepticism. News as propaganda.

How convenient it all is. The White Australia Policy is back as “homeland security” – yet another American term that institutionalises both paranoia and its bed-fellow, racism. Put simply, we are being brainwashed to believe that Al-

JOHN PILGER | POWER, PROPAGANDA & CONSCIENCE

Qaida, or any such group, is the real threat. And it isn't. By a simple mathematical comparison of American terror and Al-Qaida terror, the latter is a lethal flea. In my lifetime, the United States has supported and trained and directed terrorists in Latin America, Africa, Asia. The toll of their victims is in the millions.

In the days before September 11, 2001, when America routinely attacked and terrorised weak states, and the victims were black and brown-skinned people in faraway places like Zaire and Guatemala, there were no headlines saying terrorism. But when the weak attacked the powerful, spectacularly on September 11, suddenly, there was terrorism.

This is not to say that the threat from al-Qaida is not real – It is very real now, thanks to American and British actions in Iraq, and the almost infantile support given by the Howard government. But the most pervasive, clear and present danger is that of which we are told nothing.

It is the danger posed by “our” governments – a danger suppressed by propaganda that casts “the West” as always benign: capable of misjudgment and blunder, yes, but never of high crime. The judgement at Nuremberg takes another view. This is what the judgement says; and remember, these words are the basis for almost 60 years of international law: “To initiate a war of aggression, it is not only an international crime; it is the supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole”

In other words, there is no difference, in the principle of the law, between the action of the German regime in the late 1930s and the Americans in 2003. Fuelled by religious fanaticism, a corrupt Americanism and corporate greed, the Bush cabal is pursuing what the military historian Anatol Lieven calls “the classic modern strategy of an endangered right-wing oligarchy, which is to divert discontent into nationalism”. Bush’s America, he warns, “has become a menace to itself and to mankind.”

Those are rare words. I know of no Australian historian or any other so-called expert to have uttered such a truth. I know of no Australian media organisation that would allow its journalists to speak or write such a truth. My friends in Australian journalism whisper it, always in private. They even encourage outsiders, like myself, to say it publicly, as I am doing now.

Why? Well, a career, security – even fame and fortune – await those who propagate the crimes of official enemies. But a very different treatment awaits those who turn the mirror around. I’ve often wondered if George Orwell, in his

JOHN PILGER | POWER, PROPAGANDA & CONSCIENCE

great prophetic work 1984, about thought control in totalitarian state ... I've often wondered what the reaction would have been had he addressed the more interesting question of thought control in relatively free societies. Would he have been appreciated and celebrated? Or would he have faced silence, even hostility?

Of all the western democracies, Australia is the most derivative and the most silent. Those who hold up a mirror are not welcome in the media. My work is syndicated and read widely around the world, but not in Australia, where I come from. However, I am mentioned in the Australian press quite frequently. The official commentators, who dominate the press, will refer critically to an article of mine they may have read in the Guardian or New Statesman in London. But Australian readers are not allowed to read the original, which must be filtered through the official commentators. But I do appear regularly in one Australian paper: the Hinterland Voice – a tiny free sheet, whose address is Post Office Kin Kin in Queensland. It's a fine local paper. It has stories about garage sales and horses and the local scouts, and I'm proud to be part of it.

It's the only paper in Australia in which I've been able to report the evidence of the disaster in Iraq – for example, that the attack on Iraq was planned from September 11; that only a few months earlier, Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice, had stated that Saddam Hussein was disarmed and no threat to anyone.

Today, the United States is currently training a gestapo of 10,000 agents, commanded by the most ruthless, senior elements of Saddam Hussein's secret police. The aim is to run the new puppet regime behind a pseudo-democratic façade – and to defeat the resistance. That information is vital to us, because the fate of the resistance in Iraq is vital to all our futures. For if the resistance fails, the Bush cabal will almost certainly attack another country – possibly North Korea, which is nuclear armed.

Just over a month ago, the United Nations General Assembly voted on a range of resolutions on disarmament of weapons of mass destruction. Remember the charade of Iraq's WMDs? Remember John Howard in Parliament last February, saying that Saddam Hussein, “will emerge with his arsenal of chemical and biological weapons intact”, and that it was “a massive programme”.

In a speech lasting 30 minutes, Howard referred more than 30 times to the threat posed by Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction. And it was all a deception, wasn't it, a lie, a terrible joke on the public, and it was channelled and amplified by an obedient media. And who in the universities, our power-houses of knowledge and criticism and debate – who stood up and objected? I can think of just two.

JOHN PILGER | POWER, PROPAGANDA & CONSCIENCE

Nor can I find any report in the media of the United Nations General Assembly resolutions on 8th December. The outcome was remarkable, if not surprising. The United States opposed all the most important resolutions, including those dealing with nuclear weapons. In its secret Nuclear Posture Review for 2002, the Bush administration outlines contingency plans to use nuclear weapons against North Korea, and Syria, and Iran and China.

Following suit, a British government has announced for the first time that Britain will attack non-nuclear states with nuclear weapons “if necessary”. Who among you is aware of these ambitions, and yet American and British intelligence facilities in this country are crucial to their implementation.

Why is there no public discussion about this? The answer is that Australia has become a microcosm of the self-censored society. In its current index of press freedom, the international monitoring organisation Reporters Without Borders lists Australian press freedom in 50th place, ahead only of autocracies and dictatorships. How did this come about?

In the nineteenth century, Australia had a press more fiercely independent than most countries. In 1880, in New South Wales alone, there were 143 independent titles, many of them with a campaigning style and editors who believed it was their duty to be the voice of the people. Today, of twelve principal newspapers in the capital cities, one man, Rupert Murdoch, controls seven. Of the ten Sunday newspapers, Murdoch has seven. In Adelaide and Brisbane, he has effectively a complete monopoly. He controls almost 70 per cent of capital city circulation. Perth has only one newspaper.

Sydney, the largest city, is dominated by Murdoch and by the Sydney Morning Herald, whose current editor in chief Mark Scott told a marketing conference in 2002 that journalism no longer needed smart and clever people. “They are not the answer,” he said. The answer is people who can execute corporate strategy. In other words, mediocre minds, obedient minds.

The great American journalist Martha Gellhorn once stood up at a press conference and said: “Listen, we’re only real journalists when we’re not doing as we’re told. How else can we ever keep the record straight?” The late Alex Carey, the great Australian social scientist who pioneered the study of corporatism and propaganda, wrote that the three most significant political developments of the twentieth century were, “the growth of democracy, the growth of corporate power and the growth of corporate propaganda as a means of protecting corporate power against democracy”.

Carey was describing the propaganda of 20th century imperialism, which is the

JOHN PILGER | POWER, PROPAGANDA & CONSCIENCE

propaganda of the corporate state. And contrary to myth, the state has not withered away; indeed, it has never been stronger. General Suharto was a corporate man – good for business. So his crimes were irrelevant, and the massacres of his own people and of the East Timorese were consigned to an Orwellian black hole. So effective is this historical censorship by omission that Suharto is currently being rehabilitated. In *The Australian* last October, Owen Harries described the Suharto period as a “golden era” and urged Australia to once again embrace the genocidal military of Indonesia.

Recently, Owen Harries gave the Boyer Lectures on the ABC. This is an extraordinary platform: in six episodes broadcast on Radio National, Harries asked whether the United States was benign or imperial. After some minor criticisms of American power, he described the foreign policy of the most dangerous administration in modern times as “utopian”.

Who is Owen Harries? He was an adviser to the government of Malcolm Fraser. But in none of the publicity about his lectures have I read that Harries was also involved with an CIA-front propaganda organisation, the Congress for Cultural Freedom and its Australian offshoot. For years, Harries was an apologist for the cold war and the initial CIA-run attack on Vietnam. In Washington, he was editor of an extreme right wing journal called *The National Interest*.

No one would deny Owen Harries his voice in any democracy. But we should know who his former sponsors were. Moreover, it is his extreme view that is the one that dominates. That the ABC should provide him with such a platform tells us a great deal about the effects of the long-running political intimidation of our national broadcaster.

Consider, on the other hand, the ABC’s treatment of Richard Flanagan, one of our finest novelists. Last year, Flanagan was asked to read a favourite piece of fiction on a Radio National programme and explain his reasons for the choice. He decided on one of his favourite writers of fiction: John Howard. He listed Howard’s most famous fictions – that desperate refugees had wilfully thrown their children overboard, and that Australia was endangered by Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction.

He followed this with Molly Bloom’s soliloquy from Joyce’s *Ulysses*, because, he explained, “in our time of lies and hate it seems appropriate to be reminded of the beauty of saying yes to the chaos of truth”. Well, all of this was duly recorded. But when the programme was broadcast, all references to the prime minister had been cut out. Flanagan accused the ABC of rank censorship. No, was the response. They just didn’t want “anything political”. And this is the same ABC

JOHN PILGER | POWER, PROPAGANDA & CONSCIENCE

that has just given Owen Harries, the voice of George W Bush's utopia, six one hour broadcasts.

As for Richard Flanagan, that wasn't the end of it. The ABC producer who had censored him asked if he would be interested in coming on a programme to discuss, "disillusionment in contemporary Australia". In a society that once prided itself on its laconic sense of irony, there was not even a hint of irony, just an obedient, managerial silence. "All around me," wrote Flanagan, "I see avenues for expression closing, and odd collusion of an ever-more cowed media and the way in which the powerful seek to dictate what is and what is not read and heard."

I believe those words speak for many Australians. Half a million of them converged on the centre of Sydney on February 16 th, and this was repeated proportionally across the country. Ten Million marched across the world. People who had never protested before protested the fiction of Howard and of Bush and Blair.

If Australia is the microcosm, consider the destruction of free speech in the United States, which constitutionally has the freest press in the world. In 1983, the principal media in America was owned by fifty corporations. In 2002, this had fallen to just nine companies. Today, Murdoch's Fox Television and four other conglomerates are on the verge of controlling 90 per cent of the terrestrial and cable audience. Even on the Internet, the leading twenty websites are now owned by Fox, Disney, AOL, Time Warner, Viacom and other giants. Just fourteen companies attract 60 per cent of all the time Americans spend online. And these companies control, or influence most of the world's visual media, the principal source of information for most people.

"We are beginning to learn," wrote Edward Said in his book *Culture and Imperialism*, "that de-colonisation was not the termination of imperial relationships but merely the extending of a geo-political web that has been spinning since the Renaissance. The new media have the media to penetrate more deeply into a receiving culture than any previous manifestation of Western technology." Compared with a century ago, when "European culture was associated with a white man's presence, we now have in addition an international media presence that insinuates itself over a fantastically wide range."

He was referring not only to news. Right across the media, children are remorsefully targeted by big business propaganda, commonly known as advertising. In the United States, some 30,000 commercial messages are targeted at children every year. The chief executive of one leading advertising company

JOHN PILGER | POWER, PROPAGANDA & CONSCIENCE

explained: “They aren’t children so much as evolving consumers.” Public relations is the twin of advertising. In the last twenty years, the whole concept of PR has changed dramatically and is now an enormous propaganda industry. In the United Kingdom, it’s estimated that pre-packaged PR now accounts for half of the content of some major newspapers. The idea of “embedding” journalists with the US military during the invasion of Iraq came from public relations experts in the Pentagon, whose current strategic-planning literature describes journalism as part of psychological operations, or “psyops”. Journalism as psyops.

The aim, says the Pentagon, is to achieve “information dominance” – which, in turn, is part of “full spectrum dominance” – the stated policy of the United States to control land, sea, space and information. They make no secret of it. It’s in the public domain.

Those journalists who go their own way, those like Martha Gellhorn and Robert Fisk, beware. The independent Arab TV organisation, Al-Jazeera, was bombed by the Americans in Afghanistan and Iraq. In the invasion of Iraq, more journalists were killed than ever before – by the Americans. The message could not be clearer. The aim, eventually, is that there’ll be no distinction between information control and media. That’s to say: you won’t know the difference.

That alone is worthy of reflection by journalists: those who still believe, like Martha Gellhorn, that their duty is to keep the record straight. The choice is actually quite simple: they are truth-tellers, or, in the words of Edward Herman, they merely “normalise the unthinkable”.

In Australia, so much of the unthinkable has already been normalised. Almost twelve years after Mabo, the basic rights of the first Australians, known as native title, have become ensnared in legal structures. The Aboriginal people now fight not just to survive. They face a constant war of legal attrition, fought by lawyers. The legal bill and associated costs in native title administration alone now runs into hundreds of million of dollars. Puggy Hunter, a West Australian Aboriginal leader, told me: “Fighting the lawyers for our birthright, fighting them every inch of the way, will kill me.” He died soon afterwards, in his forties.

The High Court of Australia, once regarded as the last hope for the First Australians, now refers to native title as having a “bundle of rights” – as if Aboriginal rights can be sorted and graded – and downgraded.

The unthinkable is the way we allow the government to treat refugees, against whom our brave military is dispatched. In camps so bad that the United Nations inspector said he had never seen anything like them, we allow what amounts to child abuse.

JOHN PILGER | POWER, PROPAGANDA & CONSCIENCE

On October 19th 2001, a boat carrying 397 people sank on its way to Australia. 353 drowned, many of them children. Were it not for a single individual, Tony Kevin, a retired Australian diplomat, this tragedy would have been consigned to oblivion. Thanks to him, we now know the Australian and military intelligence knew the boat was in grave danger of sinking, and did nothing. Is that surprising when the prime minister of Australia and the responsible minister have created such an atmosphere of hostility towards these defenceless people – a hostility designed, I believe, to tap the seam of racism that runs right through our history.

Consider the culpable loss of those lives against the pompous statements of Australian defence experts about our “sphere of influence” in Asia and the Pacific – that allows the Australian military to invade the Solomon’s, but not to save 353 lives.

Threats? Let’s talk about threats from asylum-seekers in leaking boats, from Al-Qaida. In its annual report for 1990, the Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation, ASIO, stated: “The only discernible threat of politically motivated violence comes from the racist right.” I believe, regardless of subsequent events, nothing has changed.

All these matters are connected. They represent, at the very least, an assault on our intellect and our morality, yet even in our cultural life, we seem to turn away, as if frightened. Last week, I attended the opening of a new play in Sydney called “Harbour”. It ‘s about the great struggle on the waterfront in 1998 which attracted extraordinary public support. The play is an act of neutering, its stereotypes and sentimentality make history acceptable. Those who can afford the \$60-odd for a ticket will not be disappointed. The sponsors, Jaguar and Fairfax and a huge law firm, will not be disappointed.

We must reclaim our history from corporatism; for our history is rich and painful and, yes, proud. We should reclaim it from the John Howards and the Keith Windshuttles, who deny it, and from the polite people and their sponsors who neuter it. You will hear them say that Joe Blow doesn’t care – that as a people, we are apathetic and indifferent.

It was the thousands of Australians who went into the streets in 1999, in city after city, town after town, who decisively helped the people of East Timor – not John Howard, not General Cosgrove. And those Australians were not indifferent. It was the thousands of Australians and New Zealanders who stopped the French exploding their nuclear bombs in the Pacific. And they were not indifferent. It was the young people who travelled to Woomera and forced the closure of that disgraceful camp. And they were not indifferent.

JOHN PILGER | POWER, PROPAGANDA & CONSCIENCE

The tragedy for many Australians seeking pride in the achievements of our nation is the suppression or the neutering, in popular culture, of a politically distinctive past, of which we there is much to be proud. In the lead and silver mines of Broken Hill, the miners won the world's first 35-hour a week, half a century ahead of Europe and America. Long before most of the world, Australia had a minimum wage, child benefits, pensions and the vote for women. By the 1960s, Australia could boast the most equitable spread of income in the western world. In spite of Howard and Ruddock, in my lifetime, Australia has been transformed from a second-hand Anglo-Irish society to one of the most culturally diverse and attractive on earth, and almost all of it has happened peacefully. Indifference had nothing to do with it.

I can almost hear a few of you saying, "OK, then what should we do?"

As Noam Chomsky recently pointed out, you almost never hear that question in the so-called developing world, where most of humanity struggles to live day by day. There, they'll tell you what they are doing.

We have none of the life-and-death problems faced by, say, intellectuals in Turkey or campesinos in Brazil or Aboriginal people in our own third world. Perhaps too many of us believe that if we take action, then the solution will happen almost overnight. It will be easy and fast. Alas, it doesn't work that way.

If you want to take direct action – and I believe we don't have a choice now: such is the danger facing all of us – then it means hard work, dedication, commitment, just like those people in countries on the front line, who ought to be our inspiration. The people of Bolivia recently reclaimed their country from water and gas multinationals, and threw out the president who abused their trust. The people of Venezuela have, time and again, defended their democratically elected president against a ferocious campaign by an American-backed elite and the media it controls. In Brazil and Argentina, popular movements have made extraordinary progress – so much so that Latin America is no longer the vassal continent of Washington.

Even in Colombia, into which the United States has poured a fortune in order to shore up a vicious oligarchy, ordinary people – trade unionists, peasants, young people have fought back.

These are epic struggles you don't read much about here. Then there's what we call the anti-globalisation movement. Oh, I detest that word, because it's much more than that. It's a remarkable response to poverty and injustice and war. It's more diverse, more enterprising, more internationalist and more tolerant of difference than anything in the past, and it's growing faster than ever.

JOHN PILGER | POWER, PROPAGANDA & CONSCIENCE

In fact, it is now the democratic opposition in many countries. That is the very good news. For in spite of the propaganda campaign I have outlined, never in my lifetime have people all over the world demonstrated greater awareness of the political forces ranged against them and the possibilities of countering them. The notion of a representative democracy controlled from below where the representatives are not only elected but can be called truly to account, is as relevant today as it was when first put into practice in the Paris Commune 133 years ago. As for voting, yes, that's a hard won gain. But the Chartists, who probably invented voting as we know it today, made clear that it was gain only when there was a clear, democratic choice. And there's no clear, democratic choice now. We live in a single-ideology state in which two almost identical factions compete for our attention while promoting the fiction of their difference.

The writer Arundhati Roy described the outpouring of anti-war anger last year as "the most spectacular display of public morality the world has ever seen". That was just a beginning and a cause for optimism.

Why? Because I think a great many people are beginning to listen to that quality of humanity that is the antidote to rampant power and its bedfellow: racism. It's called conscience. We all have it, and some are always moved to act upon it. Franz Kafka wrote: "You can hold back from the suffering of the world, you have free permission to do so and it is in accordance with your nature, but perhaps this very holding back is the one suffering that you could have avoided."

No doubt there are those who believe they can remain aloof – acclaimed writers who write only style, successful academics who remain quiet, respected jurists who retreat into arcane law and famous journalists who protest: "No one has ever told me what to say." George Orwell wrote: "Circus dogs jump when the trainer cracks the whip. But the really well-trained dog is the one that turns somersaults when there is no whip."

For those members of our small, privileged and powerful elite, I recommend the words of Flaubert. "I have always tried to live in an ivory tower," he said, "but a tide of shit is beating its walls, threatening to undermine it." For the rest of us, I offer these words of Mahatma Gandhi: "First, they ignore," he said. "Then they laugh at you. Then they fight you. Then you win." **JP**

This is the text of a speech delivered by John Pilger at the University of Western Australia in January, 2004