

The making of another America

The other day, one of my favourite cinemas closed down. The boards went up on the art-deco Valhalla in Sydney, one of the world's best at putting out powerful, political documentaries. The lack of fuss might have seemed surprising in a city whose iconic Opera House is said to embody modern Australia's pride in the arts. On the contrary, the closure reflected a more general shutting down.

The Valhalla was certainly an anomaly in an Australia so entrapped by the cult of "marketing" that an executive of the Sydney Morning Herald can declare "the answer" is "not smart and clever people" but "people who can execute your strategy". On 9 February, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in Paris proclaimed Australia the least regulated and most privately owned economy in the western world. This is a country owned and run by businessmen.

The most vivid example is the press. Rupert Murdoch controls almost 70 per cent of principal newspaper circulation. With the exception of the multi-ethnic Special Broadcasting Service and the radio network of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the rest of the media reflect Murdochism and a market ideology imported wholesale from the United States. The remarkable culture wars of the neo-conservative prime minister, John Howard, exemplify this.

Howard believes that "business and sport" are society's prime movers. The country's once-respected scientific research laboratories, the CSIRO, have been instructed to take on business sponsors. Almost alone among nations, Australia last year abstained rather than vote for a modest United Nations proposal that members should defend "diversity" in their own cultures – against rapacious great power. When Australia's leading playwright, David Williamson, likened Howard's privatised "aspirational" Australia to a cruise ship sailing to the

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“sobering destiny” of an environmental disaster, his speech was “called for” by the prime minister’s office and a vicious campaign was orchestrated in the Murdoch press.

With no political opposition to speak of, Howard’s conquests have been in cultural life, with historiography thrown in. Siding with an unchanging clique of far-right commentators, he has effectively stifled debate about Australia’s bloody colonial past while deriding the “black armband theory of history”: that is, the truth of a genocidal racism that continues to devastate the Aboriginal people. His patriotic, or “put out more flags”, campaign is pure George W Bush. Schools have been ordered to erect flagpoles, and on “Australia Day”, 26 January, which “celebrates” the “settlement” of another people’s country, flags are distributed and often displayed with gormless aggression.

This was never part of Australian life; Americans wrapped themselves in their flag, but not we Australians. We saw it as a respectful reminder of those who had gone to fight and die in Australia’s mostly catastrophic imperial wars, who “did their best”. The Howard regime has changed all this. The little leader wears a plastic flag in his lapel, just like Bush, and puts his hand on his heart, just like Bush, and reinforces a race-based society, just like Bush. While the neglect of New Orleans is Bush’s symbol, the contempt shown the first Australians is Howard’s.

On “Australia Day”, I made my way through the flags to Redfern, an Aboriginal area in the inner city, and celebrated what black Australians call Survival Day. Their first “Day of Mourning and Protest” was held in 1938 on the 150th anniversary of the white invasion. Over a thousand Aboriginal men and women attended that first civil rights gathering, after having been refused use of Sydney Town Hall. A long and painful campaign for freedom and justice had begun, and endures, like an invisible presence.

In Redfern Park on Survival Day, the flags were black, red and gold: colours of indigenous skin, the earth and the sun. The only report I could find of Redfern the next day was of a minor fight, which was no doubt fed to the papers by the police. Should the word “Aboriginal” enter the public arena it must be associated, where possible, with “no-hoppers”.

In Howard’s Australia, the ultimate “no-hoper” is a sick, terrified, deeply troubled and abused young man called David Hicks. Hicks was a drifter, which was once an Australian type known as a “swagman” and a “larrikin” and lauded by our bush poets and balladeers. In the 1990s, Hicks became a Muslim and drifted through Kosovo, then on to Afghanistan, where he was kidnapped by the

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Americans and sent to their concentration camp at Guantanamo Bay. Not a shred of evidence exists that Hicks fought for al-Qaeda, or is a terrorist. He is a drifter. Yet he is to face one of Bush's "military commissions", for which torture is used to extract confessions, and there is no right to cross-examine witnesses, no presumption of innocence and no standard of proof "beyond a reasonable doubt". Even three of the hand-picked US military prosecutors have withdrawn, arguing that the commission is rigged to secure convictions. Many of Australia's leading jurists agree.

The Howard government has said, in so many words, that David Hicks can rot. He is a no-hoper, un-American, uninspirational. Put out more flags.