

# First rate country run by second rate people

Shortly after Christmas, the Australian media tycoon Kerry Packer died in his mansion overlooking Sydney Harbour, guarded by large, salivating dogs. In Britain, he was remembered as the man who brought hoopla and money to cricket. Here, in Australia, his death provided a glimpse of the changes imposed on societies that once were proud to call themselves social democracies.

Lauded as “Australia’s richest man” who “achieved” a rating on Forbes magazine’s rich list, as if this put him alongside Donald Bradman and the Sydney Opera House, Packer excited a fear and sycophancy not normally associated with Australians. “Laid to rest in his beloved sunburnt country”, said the obsequious banner headline across the front page of the Sydney Morning Herald. The Sydney Sun-Herald topped this with: “Packer’s practical compassion a model for us all”.

Packer was a hulk of man who lost his temper a lot, said “fuck” a lot, gambled and lost huge amounts, admired Genghis Khan (no irony) and ruled by the sheer power of his inherited money, much of it accumulated by having legally avoided paying many millions of dollars in tax – the fail-safe method employed by his principal competitor, Rupert Murdoch. In the mid-19th century the Australian press was one of the liveliest and bravest in the world; today, dominated by the marketing empires of Murdoch, Packer and Fairfax, it is little more than a voice of Australia’s political elite and of Bush’s Washington. Not surprisingly, the government of John Howard is to give Packer a state memorial service. “Kerry,” said the prime minister, “was larger than life.” It was Howard who, stricken with pneumonia, famously got out of bed to entertain “Rupert” at his home. It was Howard who embraced the mantle bestowed by a Packer magazine that he was George W Bush’s “deputy sheriff”. (When asked about this, Bush immediately promoted him to “sheriff for south-east Asia”.)

The fear and sycophancy that Howard and his Antipodean neoconservatives

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have promoted since coming to power almost a decade ago have put paid to Australia's tenuous self-regard as "the land of fair go". (The much-abused term "lucky country" was ironic, coined by the author, the late Donald Horne to denote a first-rate country run by second-rate people.)

Like Bush's America, Howard's Australia is not so much a democracy as a plutocracy, governed for and by the "big end of town", even though, as Mark Twain pointed out, this is "an entire continent peopled by the lower orders". He was not that far out; for my generation, like that of my parents, we were the poor who had got away. There was a sense that we had inherited something other than the British legacy. Long before the rest of the western world, Australians gained a minimum wage, an eight-hour working day, pensions, maternity allowance, child benefits and the vote for women. The secret ballot was invented here and became known as the "Australian ballot". The Australian Labor Party formed governments 25 years before any comparable social democracy in Europe. In the 1960s, with the exception of the Aboriginal people – who are always the exception – Australians could boast the most equitable spread of personal income in the world.

It is a proud history that is barely a memory in Howard's Australia. His is an undeclared union with the "opposition" Labour Party, which under his predecessors Bob Hawke and Paul Keating launched a spectacular redistribution of wealth in favour of the rich. According to the financial analysts County Securities Australia, the deregulation of the television industry alone gave Packer and Murdoch "a one billion-dollar gift entirely free of tax". The convicted crook Alan Bond built a paper empire that owed 14 billion Australian dollars, or 10 per cent of the national debt. "Bondy", said Hawke, was also "larger than life".

Howard takes his legislative lead from Blair and Bush, whose police-state impulses were recently made into law here. The few members of parliament who tried to debate this were silenced, incredibly, by the Speaker. The result is that Australians who seriously question Howard's role in Iraq risk prosecution under a law of sedition: penalty seven years. This was followed by a bill that guts trade union rights. In the United Nations, which Australia helped found, Australia has stood against almost all of humanity on global warming and the rule of international law in Palestine.

The recent race riots in Sydney were all but licensed by a government whose racism has seen asylum-seekers go to their deaths in leaking boats, or kept in harsh, remote camps. Aboriginal institutions and programmes have been destroyed or emasculated and land-rights claims tied down by laws that invite

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endless litigation. Most young black Australians can look forward to prison. Behind the glamour of Australian sport, black footballers – including whole teams – are often dead before the age of 40. Australia is the only developed country on a United Nations “shame list” of countries where trachoma, an entirely preventable disease that causes blindness, is tolerated among its indigenous people. Using acolytes in the press, the government has attacked institutions, such as the National Museum, and historians who dare to remind Australians of their true past and present. Donald Horne’s “lucky country” was spot on.