

Silencing Dissent: How the Australian Government is controlling public opinion and stifling debate

by Clive Hamilton and Sarah Maddison (eds)

Allen & Unwin

Sydney, 2007

\$24.95, 279pp

ISBN 9781741751017

The central premise of this collection of essays is a significant one—that the Howard Government, supported by a ‘right-wing syndicate’ of sympathetic media commentators, is pursuing a ‘policy of systematically silencing significant political dissent’ in order to ‘ensure that its values are the only values heard in public debate.’ This ‘right-wing syndicate’ is supposedly centered around *Quadrant* magazine and includes several media commentators, the Institute of Public Affairs and The Centre for Independent Studies.

An allegation as broad and far-reaching as this takes a lot to substantiate it, but the evidence of a ‘vast right-wing conspiracy’ (as Hilary Clinton would describe it) is rather unconvincing.

For starters, the very publication of a book such as this seems to indicate that if the Government does have a policy of wiping out opposing views, it is clearly not working very well.

This is not a book that withstands close scrutiny. Evidence is selectively presented and most of the contributors have severe difficulty distinguishing between what is normal robust political debate and what is a sinister attempt to ‘silence dissent’. Two particular examples illustrate this point well.

The first is a defence by Hamilton and Maddison of two industrial relations academics, David Peetz and Barbara Pocock, who were accused of bias by Government members during the debate on industrial relations reform in 2005. These allegations of bias are presented as bullying and vilification, but a closer look at all the details (not that you’d find them in the book) paints a very different story.

Maddison and Hamilton criticise Liberal Senator Eric Abetz for describing Peetz as a ‘trade-union choirboy’, conveniently failing to point out that he actually did sing in a trade union choir, and wrote numerous pro-union and anti-Government songs for the union website ‘Workers Online’. Similarly, Pocock’s own website openly states that her career includes several years working for trade unions and one as an adviser to Natasha Stott-Despoja. Two of her most recent publications were launched by ACTU President Sharan Burrow and a further one at an ACTU press conference, so allegations of bias should not be that surprising.

Pointing out such apparent biases is hardly indicative of a ‘systematic attack’ on critics. If self-described ‘independent’ experts such as Peetz and Pocock ever appeared as expert witnesses in a court case, any half competent barrister would subject them to rigorous cross-examination on their perceived biases, and any judge would be obliged to take such biases into account. Yet when they are subjected to similar scrutiny in a political environment, this is somehow illegitimate and evidence of sinister intentions on the part of the Government.

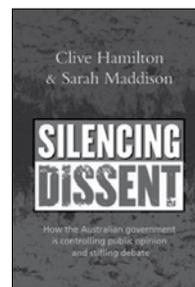
The second example is a chapter by historian Stuart Macintyre, who claims the Government is guilty of ‘direct political interference by the education minister in the allocation of research funding’ which is now a threat to the very concept of academic freedom. According to Macintyre, then Education Minister Brendan Nelson ‘violated the integrity’ of the Australian Research Council (ARC) by vetoing ARC funding for several research projects.

A Minister vetoing a mere handful of hundreds of highly esoteric Government-funded (note that they are not university-funded) research projects hardly seems to be evidence of a ‘systematic’ desire to muzzle academic freedom. And the Government has clearly not been very ‘systematic’ in muzzling the ARC given that Macintyre has been chairman of one of its expert panels and received significant ARC grant money during the Howard years.

A third assertion in the book is that the Government bullies and bribes non-government organisations (NGOs) into toeing the Government line, but the evidence for this argument is

also unconvincing. In one of the least plausible arguments put forward, Maddison and Hamilton attempt to impugn the Government’s relationship with the Salvation Army. The Salvos are criticised for working with the Government to develop ‘zero tolerance’ policies in

relation to drug abuse, instead of the authors’ preferred alternative of ‘harm minimisation’. The authors assert that in cooperating with the Government on such policies the Salvation Army is now a ‘tamed’ organisation which has been compromised by the association.



No evidence is advanced of any wrongdoing on the part of the Government, nor of the Salvation Army suffering any detriment. Its crime—and that of the Government—seems to be no more than working together on a drug policy that the authors disapprove of. This example is typical of the flimsiness of many of the cases put forward to illustrate how ‘dissent’ is being ‘silenced’.

The overriding impression that the book leaves is that of double standards. What makes the premise of the book all the more implausible is that the degree of vigour with which the Government is accused of ‘attacking’ its critics is no greater than the vigour that the book’s contributors themselves employ to attack the Government and the ‘syndicate’.

To return to the example of the industrial relations debate, Hamilton and Maddison can hardly take exception to Government members making allegations of pro-union bias when Chapter 8 of *Silencing Dissent* proceeds to analyse the background of appointees to the new Fair Pay Commission, searching for any statements in their past which may suggest they have an anti-union bias. This is exactly the same kind of scrutiny that Peetz and Pocock were subjected to.

A second illustration of double standards is Stuart Macintyre’s passionate defence of academic freedom in light of his own previous history. What Macintyre criticises as attacks on academic freedom are arguably nothing more than the spirited controversies that are part of everyday intellectual life in Australia. Many would argue that the vigorous debate that surrounded Geoffrey Blainey in the 1980s, in which Macintyre

was involved (and ultimately led to Blainey’s resignation from Melbourne University), was a far stronger attempt to ‘silence dissent’ than any of the examples referred to in his chapter.

In his foreword to the book, Robert Manne also condemns the Government for ‘personal vilification’ and ‘targeting’ of its critics. Yet Manne himself is no stranger to such tactics. Following the publication of Keith Windschuttle’s *Fabrication of Aboriginal History* questioning the left-wing consensus on Aboriginal history (an act of ‘dissent’ if ever there was one) Manne edited a book which ‘systematically’ attacked and personally targeted Windschuttle and his work, with Manne himself describing Windschuttle’s book as ‘the most reactionary book to be taken seriously in this country for very many years’ and ‘so ignorant, so polemical and so pitiless a book’. ‘Personal vilification’ indeed.

Last year Manne continued his targeting of Windschuttle with an essay asserting that he once sympathised with Pol Pot before he swung to the political Right. The irony of Robert Manne criticising anyone for previously holding different views was probably not lost on many readers, but the biggest irony of all is that the journal which published Manne’s attack was none other than *Quadrant*, the supposed centre of the ‘right-wing syndicate’ dedicated to suppressing alternative views.

For Macintyre and Manne—and many other contributors to *Silencing Dissent*—*ad hominem* attacks on intellectual opponents appear to be acceptable if they are done in the name of a cause they agree with. But if anyone on the other side should engage in vigorous debate,

then they must clearly be acting in bad faith and must be seeking to ‘silence dissent’.

The prevalence of double standards and the shallowness of the evidence presented make *Silencing Dissent* a disappointing publication at best. At worst, it seems downright disingenuous.

Reviewed by Ben Davies

Ben Davies is a former Ministerial adviser in the Howard government.

