



lecture / MARGARET SIMONS

HABITS OF DISDAIN

Myth, evidence and culture warriors

Sandra Saunders, detail from *Creation* 2003, oil on canvas, 2003

THE TITLE OF MY LECTURE alludes to one of the most striking paradoxes of public debate in this country at present.

I am referring to the gap between rhetoric and reality in the pronouncements of some prominent newspaper columnists and commentators—the people who have become known as the culture warriors of the Right. These commentators and columnists have made their mark by urging a retreat from political correctness. They condemn sentimentality and ideology. They attack others for sloppy research. But even as the culture warriors cheer on those who analyse footnotes, even as they insist on documentary evidence and hard-headed rationalism, they depart from their own principles. They fall alarmingly often into perpetuating myth.

I hope to illustrate this by talking about the response to my recent book about the Hindmarsh Island bridge affair, *The Meeting of the Waters*.

About halfway through my book, I wrote:

Perhaps the story of Hindmarsh Island is not so much opera as Dreaming story—not an Aboriginal Dreaming story, or not only that, but a story for all of us. Like a Dreaming story, it tells us something about who we are. It tells us something about our culture.

What are the highest achievements of white culture—western European culture? Most of us would think of the rule of law, judicial process, parliamentary democracy, the ideal of scholarship and also of freedom of speech, including the freedom of the media. If the Hindmarsh Island affair is a Dreaming story, then it is about these things. It is not only a story of what has been done to the

Ngarrindjeri. It is also a story of what we have done to ourselves.

I think the Hindmarsh Island bridge affair remains one of the most important episodes of recent Australian history. But I also believe that until very recently, the publicly available narrative of what happened at Hindmarsh Island has been not evidence-based history, but myth. In fact to use some words that are resonant in the culture wars at present, Hindmarsh Island has been about the fabrication of history.

The details of the Hindmarsh Island affair will be dim in the minds of many, despite its importance. It was a turning point in our history, and I am not the only one who thinks this.

The anthropologist Dr Ron Brunton, until recently employed by the Institute of Public Affairs and now the Howard Government's most recent appointment to the ABC Board, has been one of the main barrackers for the view that Hindmarsh Island was about Aboriginal people lying.

In 1996, he wrote that the Howard Government's handling of the affair would "set the stage for its approach to Aboriginal affairs, and its attitude to probity in public life". He wrote that the affair was a metaphor for the Keating Government's approach to Aboriginal politics and Aboriginal heritage.¹ I agree with him on both points, although we differ hugely in our attitudes to the rights and wrongs of what happened on this little island at the mouth of the Murray.

Hindmarsh Island did indeed set the stage for all that has come since in Aboriginal affairs including, among other things, the prevailing attitude of scep-

ticism to oral history—the things Aboriginal people say about themselves.

The Hindmarsh Island bridge affair was in many ways the beginning of today's culture wars. Some might claim different dates. The Coronation Hill dispute in the mid 1980s was an overture, but there is no doubt that Hindmarsh Island was the Grand Opera.

Many of those who remain at the centre of the wars had their first walk in the sun, and came to national prominence, through the Hindmarsh Island affair.

Christopher Pearson, now a columnist for the *Australian*, made the leap from the Adelaide pond, and became a moderately sized fish in larger waters. Pearson is on the record as saying that it was his role in helping to precipitate the Hindmarsh Island Royal Commission that chiefly influenced John Howard to appoint Pearson as his speechwriter.² Since then, Pearson has been appointed to a range of key cultural institutions, including the council of the National Museum of Australia. The Museum has been under attack from Keith Windschuttle and others for its approach to Aboriginal history.

Another key player in the Hindmarsh Island affair, Dr Philip Jones, was a key member of the panel appointed to review displays at the National Museum and investigate allegations of political bias. Jones is, or was, a close friend of Pearson's. And so it goes on. Hindmarsh Island is one of the cornerstones of the culture wars, and indeed of recent Australian history.

But I am leaping too far ahead for those of you who have forgotten what it was all about. Let me take a step back.

The Hindmarsh Island affair is today best remembered as the episode that popularised the phrase 'secret women's business', now nearly always used mockingly and ironically. I have even seen it in an advertisement for chocolate biscuits.

So what was secret women's business all about? In the early 1990s there was a plan to build a bridge from the little South Australian town of Goolwa to Hindmarsh Island, which sits at the mouth of the Murray River—a place that might be loosely described as a sacred site for all Australians. I ask you to remember the name 'Goolwa', because I will return to it later.

At the last minute, in early 1994 and after planning approval had been granted, Aboriginal women of the Ngarrindjeri people claimed the island was

special to them for reasons that could not be revealed. They applied to the then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Robert Tickner, for a heritage order prohibiting the bridge.

As part of this process some of their secrets were written down and sealed in two envelopes marked 'Confidential: to be read by women only'. The women were successful. The Keating government banned the bridge. This was controversial, but would have long since disappeared from all but legal history books were it not for what happened next.

In early 1995—almost a year after the bridge was banned—another group of Aboriginal women came forward and said the claim of what had become known as 'secret women's business' was a hoax. They said the original Ngarrindjeri women had made up the stories.

A Royal Commission was called. In December 1995 it found that the secret women's business was a fabrication. 'Lies, lies, lies' was the headline in the *Adelaide Advertiser*.

There is nothing more corrosive to a relationship than the belief that you have been lied to. The finding of the Hindmarsh Island Royal Commission has echoed through Australian life since, to the point where it is now difficult to imagine how different things might have been had the Hindmarsh Island bridge affair never happened.

It has become entirely accepted that secret women's business was a lie. The conventional wisdom has been that the Hindmarsh Island bridge affair, and the willingness of white people to believe the Ngarrindjeri lies, marked the high-water mark of politically correct soft-headedness and sentimentality. Scepticism, even cynicism, has become the intellectually respectable way to approach the things Aboriginal people say about themselves.

In 2001, the Hindmarsh Island bridge was in the headlines again. The Federal Court had made a judgement that was interpreted by the media as overturning the findings of the Royal Commission. But the judgement was ridiculed in the popular press, most forcefully in the writings of those culture warriors who had supported the Royal Commission and indeed helped to bring it about.

Many people, by this time, had wearied of the story. This included the Labor Party, which has long since seemed to regard the entire affair as a slight embarrassment—part of the Keating legacy from which it wishes to distance itself.

I think this lack of interest is a shame, because Hindmarsh Island is one of the iconic cultural events of our time. I think we will be dealing with what happened at the mouth of the Murray in the 1990s, and what it means, for a long time yet. This is one of those big, almost archetypal stories, that we get in Australian history from time to time. Ludwig Leichhardt, Azaria Chamberlain, the NSW Rum Rebellion. Hindmarsh Island.

It is a story with mythic elements, and it is about myths—both those of Aboriginal Australia and perhaps more interestingly, those of white Australia.

In an article in the *Courier Mail* a few weeks ago, the publisher and columnist Michael Duffy claimed that the Right had pretty much won Australia's culture wars. He too put the argument in terms of myths and their debunking. He said that there were many "myths" that had once been central to our view of society that were now exposed because the "hegemony of the Left" was no more. Among the things he listed as discredited myths were the following assertions:

that Aborigines are frequently killed in police stations; that economic reform will impoverish Australia; that genocide was committed against the Tasmanian Aborigines; that divorce and separation do not harm children; that one in three Australian wives is beaten up by her husband; that sea levels will rise by several centimetres by the year 2003 due to global warming; and that there was women's business at Hindmarsh Island.

Duffy said:

At various times to disagree with any of these assertions meant attracting bitter and often vicious criticism in certain circles, particularly down south. This is no longer the case: the beliefs are still widespread, but debate is now tolerated. It is a dramatic change to the public culture of this country.³

These remarks are very telling. But let me make one thing clear. If he is correct, and political correctness is effectively dead, then I am glad. I am no champion of suppressing debate.

To the extent that the Left had fallen into habits of disdain, of closing down debate, of exercising a kind of soft censorship necessitating extraordinary acts of individual courage to combat, then political correctness was destructive.

Political correctness at its worst constituted a refusal to countenance evidence and points of view that were uncomfortable. When our minds close to evidence, when we insist on only thinking along certain well-defined tracks, then we betray the values of the enlightenment. We betray our own culture. We become dangerous.

The other thing that interests me about what Duffy wrote is, of course, that he placed Hindmarsh Island at the centre of the culture wars. And he talked about the "bitter and vicious" attacks the Right used to attract in the bad old days when debate, allegedly, wasn't tolerated.

But I'd like to ask Duffy what he thinks of the reception I have had over the past few weeks from some quarters. I would suggest that the "bitter and often vicious criticism" now comes most noticeably from those who are supposedly the victors. From the culture warriors of the Right.

I am talking about habits of disdain. This, I think, is what I have come up against. On both sides of the political divide, there is a sneering that takes the place of reasonable debate. People seem to have got used to *disdaining* certain points of view. They have fallen into comfortable habits. They sneer on cue. When something pops up that looks like what they are used to disdaining, they respond with a reflex sneer, and without considering the argument on its merits. And in all this, evidence gets lost.

A few years ago, Frank Moorhouse—once one of the main critics of political correctness—made an interesting pronouncement. He said there was a new threat to public life, a "curious and infuriating phenomenon even more mindless than political correctness and perhaps more vicious—the posture of anti-Political Correctness." Moorhouse said:

I have observed a veritable appetite, say among some columnists, to oppose anything which sounds humanistic or what they consider to be held as politically correct by liberal-humanists—and Political Correctness it has to be remembered contains within its list many genuine virtues (it is the social implication that these virtues are beyond discussion which is the problem). It is a sure sign of political mindlessness to oppose all of the agenda of one's opponent. I think anti-Political Correctness is now the greater bane. A compulsive need to ridicule every humane or 'softhearted' impulse in areas of the indigenous people, illegal immigrants, feminism and so on.⁴

I was always a little sceptical about the censorship claims, given that they were being made by people with tenured academic posts and lots of space on the opinion pages of the nation's newspapers. For censored people, they certainly made a lot of noise.

I am with Moorhouse here. I think that in seeking to combat political correctness the warriors of the Right have fallen into something at least as silly and dangerous, and at least as ideologically blind to evidence. I sometimes think they have not advanced public and political discourse, but rather have given us the mirror image of what they opposed.

Duffy is correct. It is now permissible to say there was no women's business at Hindmarsh Island. In fact, I think my experience suggests that the more impermissible thing to say is that perhaps there was secret women's business at Hindmarsh Island.

I remember not so many years ago when people advancing right-wing points of view complained of soft censorship, of being subjected to abuse, name calling, and assaults on their professional reputations, rather than their ideas being properly considered. I was always a little sceptical about the censorship claims, given that they were being made by people with tenured academic posts and lots of space on the opinion pages of the nation's newspapers. For censored people, they certainly made a lot of noise.

But I think it is true that the Left was guilty of habits of disdain. That those on the Left threw names and labels around—racist, right winger and so on—rather than mounting arguments. And I think the Left has paid the price for that. If the Right has won the culture wars, part of the reason is that those on the Left have failed to articulate their case.

Particularly in areas such as Aboriginal disadvantage, the Left has failed to face up to the evidence of appalling policy failure. I agree with much of what Dr Marcia Langton said in last year's *Overland* lecture on these matters. But others are much better qualified than me to speak on Aboriginal disadvantage.

Let me return to Hindmarsh Island. Since Christopher Pearson was one of the main participants in the Hindmarsh Island affair, it isn't surprising that he was one of the first to respond to my book. Did he attack the evidence? No. Did he show

where I had erred, giving too much weight to this or not enough to that? No. He resorted to misrepresentation and ad hominem attack. In one column, he referred to me as a "Gaia new age spiritualist" gardening columnist. When I responded correcting his errors and urging a consideration of the evidence, he attacked again, this time portraying me as a ruthlessly unethical journalist. He made the quite astonishing claim—one of a number of inventions directed at my credibility—that in an interview with him I had asked whether he had slept with any of the people involved in the Hindmarsh Island affair.

As if I would.

Pearson's response to this book has been not evidence-based argument, but misrepresentation and an assault on my professional reputation.

Paul Sheehan wrote a column attacking my book in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 19 May. The tenor of his column was that the Hindmarsh Island affair was a "crapulous saga", not worthy of further consideration. It was, he said, "amazing" that my book had caused the affair to surface again. My book, he said "tries to give credibility to the incredible".

Big statements, and one would expect the rest of the column to substantiate the attack. Nothing of the kind. His column was a recycling of old myths—white-man myths—about the Hindmarsh Island bridge affair, all of which had been addressed and debunked in the book. Sheehan attacked my book without naming it, and indeed it seemed to me without reading it. I wrote a letter to the editor, which the paper ran, accusing Sheehan of not having read the book. I haven't heard any rebuttal.

So much for intellectual rigour. So much for careful assessment of evidence. So much, indeed, for rationality.

Look at the language the cultural warriors use. Ron Brunton's language has been some of the most belligerent.

Brunton has, in various places, suggested that those who questioned or failed to support the find-

ings of the Royal Commission could do more harm to reconciliation than the worst racists. He has said that anthropologists who argued for the possibility of secret women's business were guilty of "creative anthropology" and "behaving badly".

Other commentators have adopted similar language. Piers Akerman who, as my book reveals, also was a player in the events that led to the calling of the Royal Commission, used terms such as "weasel words from self-interested academics" to describe the argument for secret women's business. He saw the Hindmarsh Island affair as an example of the "totalitarian attitude of radical feminists and the politically correct".

And so, if one disagrees with the culture warriors, one is not just wrong, but morally bad. Despicable. Totalitarian. Soft-headed. Unprofessional. More damaging than a racist.

You can see the language everywhere in the culture wars. One is not accused of mistake, one is accused of fabrication. One does not just take an incorrect or questionable point of view, one is actively misleading. It is a bullying, hectoring sort of language. It is not the language of debate. It is the language of those who wish to dismiss, rather than engage with, alternative points of view.

It is not the language of conversation, or of free and rational debate. It is the language of propaganda.⁵

If I believed in soft censorship, then this surely is it. But I don't believe in it. People who are truly censored don't get to publish books, or give lectures such as this. Nevertheless, it is true that it takes some courage to tangle with the cultural warriors. One risks the vicious assaults that Michael Duffy claims were once the preserve of the Left. I am uncomfortably aware that by giving this lecture, I invite more attacks not necessarily on my work, but on myself and my reputation. Watch this space, I say with some trepidation. I am not complaining. Heat, kitchens, all that. But I do think the standard of public debate suffers when participants face such vitriol.

And my central message tonight is: look at the evidence on Hindmarsh Island. Argue, attack and undermine that if you can. The evidence shows that the Royal Commission miscarried. Whenever such processes miscarry, it is surely important for us to understand how and why. In the face of this urgent duty, ad hominem attacks are painful, but beside the point.

It is both a great shame and not at all surprising that many potentially worthwhile contributors never take part in media debates, and are confined largely to academia.

A great deal of good work goes unnoticed as a result. One of the most striking examples is surely the thorough and detailed research of the historian Anna Haebich, whose book *Broken Circles*, about the stolen generation, picked up a swag of literary and academic prizes yet failed to inform or visibly affect the then virulent public debate about Aboriginal children being taken from their parents.

This was despite the Right lamenting the lack of solid historical research on the issue. Haebich had done that research, yet they ignored her.

I asked Haebich recently whether she had considered making forays into the opinion pages of the nation's newspapers. Unfortunately, nobody asked her to do so, and she lacked the contacts one apparently needs in the media world. But in any case she didn't see the point. She would have had to risk personal attack. And, she said, what was the point of trying to debate the culture warriors, when they weren't really prepared to listen or engage? She said, "It's rather like trying to argue with a drunk at a party."

Back to Hindmarsh Island. Despite the responses I have described, the book is published. The Federal Court made its findings. The evidence on Hindmarsh Island is now out there, and there is no denying it. Any fair-minded consideration of that evidence can only lead to one conclusion: there never was a solid reason to think that Aboriginal women lied about secret women's business, and there are many reasons to think they were telling the truth. The Royal Commission was a miscarriage of justice.

How this miscarriage of justice came about is a story about secrets and power, and how they work not only in Ngarrindjeri society, but most tellingly in our own. Quite simply, the cultural warriors have been wrong about Hindmarsh Island. Several of them helped precipitate the Royal Commission. Then, victorious, they wrote the history.

I wouldn't have needed to write such a long book if the evidence for these statements could be briefly laid out, but I will detail just two pieces of documentary evidence—not dependant on Aboriginal oral history or on my ethics or otherwise as an interviewer—that support this conclusion.

From early 1994, the Ngarrindjeri were claim-

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ing that part of the significance of the site of the bridge—the channel of water between Hindmarsh Island and the town of Goolwa—was that it was known as ‘The Meeting of the Waters’—the place where salt and fresh water met. This was seen as a place of great fertility and life.

The Royal Commission dismissed this aspect of the claim out of hand. It made no sense, the Commission said, because the barrages across the mouth of the Murray, which were built in the 1930s and forties, already stopped the water from mixing, so how could a bridge be a problem?

As well, the Royal Commission said, there was no reason why the site of the bridge should be particularly identified as the Meeting of the Waters, since before the barrages fresh and salt water would have met throughout the lake system, depending on tides and the amount of flow in the river. All this seemed logical enough—although some did point out that matters of religious belief do not normally yield to logic.

But all this time, only a few blocks from the Royal Commission hearing room, there was a documentary record that would have forced a different conclusion. In the reading room of the Mordlock section of the State Library of South Australia is a book containing an extract from the diaries of Charles Harding, an early settler in the Goolwa/Hindmarsh Island area.

Harding had recorded that the name “goolwa” had been explained to him by a native as meaning “sometimes fresh, and sometimes of mixed water” to distinguish it from the nearby Coorong, which meant “very salty water”.⁶

So there was an independent documentary record to support the Ngarrindjeri oral claims.

Let me deal with another piece of documentary evidence. At the Royal Commission, the only proponent Ngarrindjeri woman to give evidence was Veronica Brodie, who said that the heart of the secret women’s business was to do with the Pleiades, or Seven Sisters constellation of stars.

The Royal Commission dismissed Brodie out of hand. It concluded, extraordinarily, that the Seven Sisters had never been part of Ngarrindjeri mythology.

There was evidence before the Royal Commission that should have led to a different conclusion. It was apparently overlooked. But since then work by the eminent anthropologist Peter Sutton has established that the Ngarrindjeri did indeed have Seven Sisters mythology. Among the many strands of evidence is a book about the Ngarrindjeri by the anthropologists Ron and Catherine Berndt. This is a volume the culture warriors point to as an infallible source in other contexts. It contains a star chart that clearly shows the Pleiades identified as *yarooka*, or young women. The documentary record makes it clear the constellation was associated with seasonal change, initiation and fertility.

And yet, the response to this new documentary evidence, which supports what the Ngarrindjeri had said all along, has been not serious minded consideration but a recounting of the white man’s myths about this affair. Pearson stated once again in his recent column responding to my book that there was no Seven Sisters mythology. He is simply wrong.

And as well Paul Sheehan’s column was full of white-man myths. First, Sheehan said that the so-called ‘dissident women’—the Ngarrindjeri women who denied the existence of secret women’s business—had been ignored by the media. But as my book shows, when the dissident women chose to go public, they were ‘media managed’. Their story was leaked to journalists carefully selected by Liberal Party figures, including Ian McLachlan, who was actively trying to bring about a Royal Commission.

Let me make another point about the dissident women. Support and respect for them has been one of the touchstones of this debate. Ron Brunton has said that support for the dissident women is the only intellectually and morally tenable position to take.⁷

I agree with Brunton that the main dissidents were women of courage and integrity. But if Dr

Brunton had interviewed the proponent women—which he did not—he would have found exactly the same was true of them. On both sides of this debate are strong-minded, outspoken Aboriginal women of great conviction and courage, all very sure that their world view is the correct one.

So how are we to choose between them? The rationalists of the Right should know the answer. We should look at the independent evidence, including the documentary evidence.

The fact is that the force of the dissident women's evidence is very limited. All they can say—all that many of them have said—is that they weren't *told* secret women's business.

When the dissident women were cross-examined before the Federal Court in 2001, it became clear that there were many other well-established Ngarrindjeri Dreamings that they also were not aware of. It is therefore hardly surprising that they didn't know secret women's business.

Justice von Doussa of the Federal Court said of the dissident women:

I consider they were credible sincere people who now firmly hold the views which they express . . . It is clear from the evidence of a number of the dissident women who gave evidence before this Court that they consider traditional Ngarrindjeri culture and practices as historical curiosities that are no longer a part of, or appropriate to, their current lifestyles as Christian members of a wider urban community . . . I do not think their evidence denies the possibility, indeed probability, that important pockets of traditional knowledge remain possessed by some Ngarrindjeri members of the community.⁸

Having interviewed several of the dissident women, I agree with Justice von Doussa's view. The truth is that the evidence of the dissident women proves very little, despite their integrity and worth as individuals.

So what about the documentary evidence? Which way does this lie? In his column Sheehan recycled the myth that the book written by anthropologists Ron and Catherine Berndt made it impossible that secret women's business existed.

It is true that the foreword to the Berndts' book remarks on the apparent absence of separate realms of secret sacred knowledge on gender lines among the Ngarrindjeri. Ngarrindjeri culture was thought to be exceptional in this regard. But the Berndts' text

contains much that apparently contradicts or at least modifies the claim. For example, the Berndts' chronicle that women were excluded during menstruation. They were kept in separate camps and attended by senior women. There were songs and rituals associated with this, and with female initiation, which the Berndts' informant said she had forgotten.

So the second white-man's myth of Hindmarsh Island is that the documentary record rules out the existence of secret women's business. It does not. It is open to different readings, but tends on balance to support the proponent Ngarrindjeri claims.

Myth number three, recycled by both Sheehan and Pearson in their response to my book is that only one woman, the custodian Doreen Kartinyeri, claimed to know the secret women's business in 1994. This is simply not so. It is a claim that has long been discredited, and yet is continually recycled.

When the respected academic lawyer, Professor Cheryl Saunders, investigated the Ngarrindjeri claim in 1994 on behalf of Robert Tickner, it was clear to her that a number of women regarded themselves as custodians of the knowledge. Saunders' work has stood up to intensive Federal Court scrutiny on two occasions.

The claim that Kartinyeri was the only one who knew the business is based solely on the evidence of one of the dissident women, Dorothy Wilson. The Royal Commission accepted her recollection of what was said at key meetings, although she was contradicted by other witnesses. The Federal Court came to a different view. Justice von Doussa said Dorothy Wilson's evidence should not be relied upon. He found that the 'only one woman knew' claim was not true.

My book details Wilson's central part in factional battles which pre-existed the Hindmarsh Island dispute, and which I believe may have coloured her recollection.

I mentioned Christopher Pearson's response earlier, which was largely an attack on me and my reputation. He at least had clearly read the book. However, his habits of disdain were strong.

As well as recycling the 'only one woman knew' myth, he also rested some of his case on the claim that the oldest Ngarrindjeri woman alive at the time had categorically denied secret women's business. The woman to whom he was referring was Laura Kartinyeri, or Nanna Laura as she was more affectionately known.

The myth that Nanna Laura denied secret wom-

en's business is one of the most persistent of the affair. One of the things that precipitated the Royal Commission was the tabling in the South Australian Parliament of a letter supposedly from Nanna Laura, then very elderly and in poor health, in which she denied any knowledge of secret women's business at Hindmarsh Island. It was a devastating blow to the anti-bridge case. Such was Nanna Laura's background and seniority that everyone knew that she must know secret women's business, if anyone did.

But as my book shows, Nanna Laura later signed a statutory declaration, in the presence of her granddaughter, in which she stated that the letter that had been tabled in parliament had never been read by her. It had been taken to her by two Ngarrindjeri men who were, at this time, cooperating with Ian McLachlan and the bridge developers. Nanna Laura said she signed the letter in the belief that it was opposing the bridge.

Nanna Laura's later statutory declaration was never presented to the Royal Commission. The contents are laid out in my book. Yet still the myth persists that Nanna Laura denied the existence of women's business. The truth is she never expressed a clear view either way, but stated that one should not speak about such things to white people, and made her opposition to the bridge clear.

So much for the columnists. Although it doesn't behove authors to respond to reviews, I nevertheless want to say a few words about the one which appeared in the *Australian*, by Stephen Matchett.

Matchett didn't like my book, and he is entitled to his opinion. But he is not entitled to misrepresent me. He stated that my book had at its heart a view that settler Australia has no indisputable right to place its laws above those of Indigenous Australia. The book takes no such view, nor do I hold the opinion Matchett attributed to me. I am all for the rule of law. Nor do I see my book as being primarily about Ngarrindjeri culture and beliefs. Rather it is about my culture, and the highest ideals of my culture, one of which is the rule of law.

The Royal Commission was not bad because it was the enforcement of white law on black. It was bad because it was a perversion of judicial process. A betrayal, if you like, of the rule of law.

It is often said these days that the opinion pages of the nation's newspapers have become dominated by the Right wing. Maybe so, although I am not

too sure what those terms Left and Right mean any more, other than as labels generally used to dismiss—parts of the habit of disdain practiced by both sides.

Leaving aside the labels, I would have thought that minimum qualifications for newspaper and other public commentators should be the ability to fairly assess evidence, and to carry an argument. On these criteria, I suggest that some of the people I have come up against have fallen a long way short.

Hindmarsh Island distresses me for what was done to Aboriginal people, but perhaps more intensely because of what was done to my own culture—mainstream, western European culture. The values I would like to think I share with the warriors of the Right—independent scholarship, freedom of speech and respect for evidence.

All these things were perverted in the Hindmarsh Island affair.

To the extent that the cultural warriors refuse to tackle the evidence now on the public record, they are perpetuating the myths of Hindmarsh Island. They are perpetuating, in fact, their own kind of fabrication. It does them, and the other battles in which they have become involved in the years since the Hindmarsh Island bridge affair, no credit.

1. Ron Brunton, 'The False Culture Syndrome', *IPA Backgrounder* 8:2, 1996, cover quote.
2. Christopher Pearson, *George Munster Journalism forums*, September 1998, <[www.acij.uts.edu.au/old_acij/munster4/pearson.html](http://acij.uts.edu.au/old_acij/munster4/pearson.html)>.
3. Michael Duffy, *Courier-Mail*, 7 June 2003.
4. Frank Moorhouse, 2001 Stephen Murray-Smith Memorial Lecture, <www.statelibrary.vic.gov.au/slv/events/sms2001/#transcript>.
5. I am in part indebted for these insights to Ray Cassin.
6. Elva Morison, *Recollections of the South Coast Area of South Australia 1853-1978: A History of the Harding family Beginning in England in the mid 1700s*, Lutheran Publishing House, Adelaide, 1978.
7. Brunton, 'Correcting the False Scholarship Syndrome', Institute of Public Affairs website, <www.ipa.org.au/reply/falsescholar.html>.
8. Federal Court of Australia No. SG 33 of 1997, *Chapman v Luminus and others*. Available at <www.fedcourt.gov.au>.

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