What did we think we were doing, the day we went to Narre Warren? Research, I could say, seeing that I had this piece to write. Or perhaps it was tourism, or anthropology. I am not sure where the boundaries lie between those activities, those excuses for curiosity. They are all predicated on a divide, with assumptions about who is studied and who studies; who is the subject and who the audience.

We had been in the Dandenongs for a special weekend - a break from our inner-suburban lives. It was two days of plunger coffee and lying in and newspaper reading and well-cooked food. We enjoyed all the little touches retreats aimed at people like us provide - fluffy bath towels tied with ribbons. Ironed sheets. A hot tub in the garden with a view over paddocks and trees.

We were relaxed, but not at ease, it seems, because on our way back into the city we decided not to drive through the outer suburbs, but to stop and look. Food, shelter, even luxury are not enough. We want more. We want to belong. We want to know what we mean by words like “us” and “we”. Our society, our country, the people we live among.

He drove and I had the newspapers spread out on the passenger’s side, reading bits to him. We are people who use language all the time - who cannot imagine thinking or relating without it. Our togetherness is expressed with word games, with comments on the news born of a shared way of looking at things. Our words are a kind of stroking, confirming our belonging together.

We reached Narre Warren, on the south-eastern outskirts of Melbourne. We were in the federal electorate of Holt, which was once a safe Labor seat, home to the workers in the giant factories of GMH, International Harvester and Heinz. But in the federal election last year, Holt swung 6.4 per cent to the Liberal Party. It is now a marginal seat. There wasn’t much sign of giant factories as we drove in. What were recently paddocks are now housing estates filled with little blocks and big houses. We passed a street, caught sight of the name, and laughed. Ernest Wanke Road. We speculated about whether Mr Wanke had really wanted a road named after him and whether the residents were grateful.
We drove into the quiet streets of the new suburbs. What was the difference between the people who chose to live here and ourselves? The housing estate was new and light, pastel-coloured against the remaining paddocks. There was a grab bag of borrowed architectural styles - Federation, even Tudor - brushed up and made neat. The gardens were so well kept it was clear that their maintenance, and that of the homes they surrounded, must be one of the main preoccupations of the residents. Glancing through the occasional ruffled curtain, we could see plump upholstery, thick carpet and fresh flowers. It seemed to me that in these homes the little luxuries we had just experienced - the towels, even the hot tub - would not be weekend exceptions. They would be the norm. They were a priority. I thought of our own unmown front lawn. We move the guinea-pig hutch from day to day so the rodents can eat their fill, and joke that this is an environmentally sound way of keeping the grass down, although it gives the garden a piebald appearance. How scruffy we have become.

"We don’t care for ourselves in this way," I said, and wondered why not. We even take a perverse pride in our lack of concern for neatness.

We drove on, and stopped in the car park of the Fountain Gate shopping centre - the mall that is the setting for much of the action in the ABC television comedy *Kath and Kim*. It is huge - not only in its footprint, which must, if you count add-ons and neighbouring strips of home improvement, gardening and furniture stores, equal that of the Melbourne CBD. The facades of the hardware and furniture barns are several stories high, even if the shops themselves have only a ground floor. The scale is heroic. We and the other shoppers looked like the wrong, too-small dolls abandoned in a stucco LEGO set.

We went into the newsagent and asked for the titles of their biggest-selling magazines. *Girlfriend* and *Dolly*, I was told. The tabloid *Herald-Sun* was the only newspaper people bought in numbers, except on Saturday, when *The Age* carried jobs and car and real estate advertisements. We went to the bookshop and asked for the name of their bestseller. It was Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* - a tale of codes and secrets and hidden meanings and ancient religion. Nothing else came close to outselling it, we were told. Not even self-help books.

We seemed to be among the oldest people in the mall and one of very few couples without children tagging along. We were surrounded by bleached hair, artfully ruffled and stressed jeans and tracksuits. We stood out, partly because of our age, partly because of our dress. Both of us were wearing hemp. My partner also wore a silk shirt. But there was also, I thought, something indefinable that marked us apart. The looks on our faces, the way we carried ourselves and, of course, the way we were peering about. The couples sitting in the coffee shop spoke quickly, in brief sentences. The accents were broader than those in inner-city coffee shops. I searched for a word to describe the faces around us. Was it “closed”?
But by now I was feeling ridiculous. I was searching for things I would never seek to find in any other shopping centre, at any other time. I was making silly generalisations. I was trying too hard. I said: ‘I think it’s clear that I should live in Ernest Wanke Road.’ And we left.

Just 45 minutes later we were in Lygon Street, Carlton, where two bookshops face each other across a road almost entirely devoted to conspicuous refinement and good taste. One of the bookshops is Borders, part of an international chain. I asked the staff what their bestseller was. *The Da Vinci Code*, I was told. “Nothing else comes close.”

But over the road in Readings, the independent bookstore that is regarded as a centre of Melbourne’s literary life, where book launches are held, and which has conducted a long campaign against Borders on the grounds of protecting the independent Australian against the multinational, the answer was different. Here the top-10 bestseller list was posted prominently in the store - like a flag or a status symbol. *The Da Vinci Code* did not appear on it. The top novel was *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini, and in non-fiction, the bestseller was the latest in the *Australian Quarterly Essay* series - a piece by Raimond Gaita about trust and lies in politics.

What were the differences between here and Fountain Gate? The scale of Lygon Street is small. People like Readings because it is small - because it is not Borders - and precisely because it caters to minority taste. Watching the people in the cafes, it was immediately clear where the term “chattering classes” had come from. People were gathered here for the purposes of conversation. The dress was more various. There were stressed jeans and bleached hair here as well, but also elegant grey bobs and understated handmade jewellery and big mohawks and lots of black clothing.

We were in Carlton to see a movie. In the women’s toilets at the cinema was a sticker on the cubicle door showing a caricature of John Howard and the motto “Say no to John Howard’s lies”. Post-election, people had made handwritten additions. “I can’t believe anyone voted for this man,” said one. And “If you voted Liberal you are stupid. You are selfish. You are heartless.” And “I don’t know anyone who voted Liberal. The election must have been rigged.”

But Fountain Gate was less than an hour away. How odd it is, I thought, that sophisticated Carlton feels so parochial. So simple-minded.

In the lead-up to the last election, I wrote for the *Australian Quarterly Essay* series (the one that sells so well in Readings). My topic was the then opposition leader, Mark Latham. I was examining his ideas as articulated in the five books he wrote before he became leader.
Latham had written that the main divide in Australian society these days was not of wealth, but rather of access to information and public influence. He wrote: “I would argue that the political spectrum is best understood as a struggle between insiders and outsiders - the abstract values of the powerful centre, versus the pragmatic beliefs of those who feel disenfranchised by social change. This is a different framework to class-based politics. Rather than drawing their identity from the economic system, people see their place in society as a reflection of their access to information and public influence. The insiders-outsiders divide has become a reliable guide to electoral behaviour.”

The divide, he said, explained the rise of Pauline Hanson. It explained why Australians voted down a republic with a politician-appointed president, even though most wanted an Australian head of state. It explained the failure of Paul Keating and the success of John Howard.

Latham also talked about the geography of the divide. Privilege and poverty could increasingly be predicted by postcode, he said. The main differences between Australians were not state-based, but rather between regions. Carlton in Melbourne had more in common with Sydney’s Balmain than it did with outer Melbourne suburbs.

At times in his written work, Latham has used even more confronting terms to describe his insider-outsider divide. He speaks of “tourists” and “residents”. He says the insiders - people like me - live like tourists in our own country. There is a sense in which we don’t live in Australia at all. “They travel extensively, eat out and buy in domestic help. They see the challenges of globalisation as an opportunity, a chance to further develop their identity and information skills. This abstract lifestyle has produced an abstract style of politics. Symbolic and ideological campaigns are given top priority. This involves a particular methodology: adopting a predetermined position on issues and then looking for evidence to support that position.”

The outsiders, on the other hand - the people who lived in the outer suburbs and the regions - were the “residents of Australia”. Their values were pragmatic. They could not distance themselves from the problems of the neighbourhood, and so good behaviour and good services were all-important. There was no symbolism and no dogma in the suburbs, Latham said. It was a place of little pictures, not big ones.

When I wrote about Latham, I described his insider-outsider model as penetrating analysis, although I found the labels “residents” and tourists” deeply challenging and even offensive. I am, of course, on Latham’s model, an insider - a tourist. There is no denying it, although I am tempted, like many others faced with this analysis, to protest, to talk about my outsider friends and connections.

I am an Australian, and I want to belong.
I expected Latham to play well in outsider-land. I didn’t think he would win the election, since I sensed no mood for change. But I thought he would be good for the Labor Party, that he might lead a revival in its heartland, in places like Holt. I was wrong.

Although I have now moved back to the inner suburbs, I have spent most of the last 10 years living in a working-class rural community. True, it was the kind of place that insiders went when they wanted a sea change or a weekend retreat, but my children went to the local school and I was involved in the parents’ association and other community groups. The locals were curious, but not hostile, about the fact that I wrote books and journalism. The venom of talkback radio, talking up the divide between the chattering classes and the rest of Australia, did not translate into reality. My education, my wordy achievements, bought me no special status, but nor did they count against me. I was judged on my contribution to the community. And yet … there were limits.

During the Tampa crisis, I was vehemently expressing my opinion to my friend, whom I will call Ellie. She was someone I had worked alongside at dozens of fund-raising fetes and functions. She had cared for my children. I had trusted her with my secrets. Now she was avoiding my eyes.

“Well, I’m not really very interested in politics,” she said. “I don’t know much about it.” It was clear to both of us that this was evasion, but it was effective. So we didn’t talk about the Tampa, or about politics. Even if we had, I am sure neither of us would ever have changed the other’s views. There was a gap and a barrier, and we both felt it. Our intimacy was limited to the things within our grasp, to our shared experience. It did not extend to the things that could be talked about, but which we had not lived. We could not use words and opinions to confirm our solidarity.

So I saved my political discussions for my trips to the city. One afternoon, I lived a cliché. Over latte in the central city, I discussed the state of the nation with a friend who had taken on the heavy task of being a regular volunteer visitor at the Villawood detention centre. I was telling her how furious Latham’s circle was with the attitude of the left-wing intellectuals - particularly the idea that those who were concerned with asylum seekers were morally superior to those who were not. She was genuinely puzzled. “But we are,” she said. “We are morally superior.”

I thought of Ellie with a pang and felt shocked by my city friend’s assumption. But I wasn’t sure that I didn’t agree with her.

Both before and after the election, people - my inner-suburban friends - took me on over what I had written about Latham. They reminded me of their own outsider connections to friends and families living well beyond the inner suburbs. The divide, they
said, was non-existent, or not as extreme and as simple as Latham suggested. Things were more complicated, more nuanced. And who were the outsiders, after all? The chattering classes were in the minority. We were derided by every radio shock jock and by every right-wing newspaper columnist. The issues dear to us had barely featured in the election campaign. Was it not we who were alienated, disaffected and powerless?

And yet it seemed to me that my friends and I were in a kind of stew, full of pain, argument and self-righteousness.

The book of essays *Us and Them - Anti-Elitism in Australia* (API Network, 2004) seemed to me a collective bridle at the ways in which “the elite” had been derided during the Howard years. The introduction announced: “A significant new public discourse has emerged in Australian public life, one that focuses on the negative role of elites and the gap between elite values, interests and policy preferences and those of ordinary Australians.”

The authors pointed out that the journalists, radio shock jocks and politicians who did most of the deriding were themselves “elite”, and that the derision served as a cover that allowed the other elites - business, capital and the captains of finance - to keep on running the place.

It seemed to me that although this was a fair point, it mistook the issue. The very thing that was striking about this “new public discourse” was that not all elites were being derided, only some. It was not wealth or ownership or capital that was being objected to, but cultural power. The hostility was directed at those of us whose power comes from the use of language. There was little expression of resentment towards the rich and powerful, indeed they were celebrated.

One of the most striking contributions in the book was a study by Sean Scalmer and Murray Goot of mentions of “elites” in News Limited newspapers. The “elites” derided by these newspapers were “cultural” and “the establishment media”. They were the “tertiary educated” “city based” and “inner suburban”. And what was wrong with them? They were “arrogant”, “politically correct”, “faddish”, “hypocritical”, “self-serving”, “powerful” and “un-Australian”. They “criticised”, “divided”, “ruled”, “exploited”, “stifled” and “misled”.

We are dangerous poseurs, it seems. Ernest Wankes.

Scalmer and Goot wrote that in this new “elite discourse” Australia was being depicted in a way that was binary - elites versus non-elites. This was a departure from the dominant language of Australian conservatism. Menzies’ “forgotten-people” speech had imagined a tripartite structure, of workers, the rich and the civilising middle classes.
Scalmer and Goot also noted that the elites were cast, not merely as adversaries, but as enemies. “Enemies are characterised by inherent traits that make them a threat. They are evil. They possess no legitimacy. Unlike adversaries, they cannot be tolerated, only destroyed.” Yet, although the non-elites were cast as “the people” or the “true Australians”, their interests were not articulated. There was no call for change.

“If there are any references to the possibility of success against elites, they are constructed entirely around non-collective action: praise for a political leader who ignores the elites here; the prospect that something to counter the elites might be done there. But, for the most part, the “elites” are portrayed as so powerful, so flexible and so malicious that the chances of any successful action against them would be very low. Elite discourse is saturated in difference and inequality. However, it is not a language of change, possibility or … hope.”

But all this was based on the rantings of newspaper columnists, which, my own experience suggested, did not translate into real, on-the-ground hostility on the scale suggested.

I think the reason I went to Narre Warren was because I wanted to find out whether any of this was real. Were there really insiders and outsiders, or was the whole thing a wicked fiction? Was I a tourist? And if so, how might I come home?

Statistics can’t tell the whole story, and perhaps not even the most important parts. There are no statistics available that can capture the experience of cultural difference - the way people carry themselves, the way they talk, the way they dress. Statistics tell us that *The Da Vinci Code* sells well both on one side of Lygon Street (though not on the other) and in Fountain Gate. But statistics cannot describe why people are reading this book or why it has seized the popular imagination or why the patrons of Readings feel differently.

As well, concentrating on statistics tends to iron out the nuances, the exceptions to the rules. They tempt us into generalisation. It may be true that a majority of people in Carlton think a certain way - but not everyone does. Statistics can make us lose sight of variety.

Nevertheless, statistics tell us something of the difference between Fountain Gate and Carlton. If you live in the local-government area that takes in Fountain Gate, it is unlikely that you will be university-educated. Only 6.7 per cent of those over the age of 15 have a university degree, and another 6 per cent have a diploma. Of the rest, 18 per cent have a vocational qualification of some sort, but a clear majority of adults have no post-school qualifications.
In the inner suburbs of Melbourne, on the other hand, 34 per cent of adult residents have a university degree or higher qualification, and another 23 per cent are studying. Carlton, being the home of the University of Melbourne, is one of the few places in the country where the culture of tertiary education is undeniably dominant. In this suburb, 65 per cent of residents either have a degree or are studying at a university or TAFE full-time.

Which of these places is more typical of Australia? The answer is undeniably Fountain Gate. With the constant media emphasis on university entrance scores and educational aspirations it is easy for the educated middle classes to forget, or even to be ignorant of the fact, that higher education in Australia is still a minority pursuit.

The 2001 Census showed that only 46 per cent of Australians aged 25 to 64 had post-school qualifications of any kind. The most common qualification was a trade certificate. Only 18 per cent had a university degree, and the distribution of these graduates fluctuated sharply. In the major cities, 21 per cent had degrees or a higher qualification. In inner regional areas, it was 13 per cent, and in remote Australia just 10 per cent.

For those with no post-school qualifications, life is indeed different, and tough. Recent research by Monash University’s Centre of Population and Urban Research shows that people without post-school qualifications are much less likely to marry or partner than those with qualifications - and the gap is widening. If the pattern continues, soon a majority of unqualified men in their early 30s and 40s will be single, compared to only 25 per cent to 35 per cent of single men with degrees.

Among the better-off and the university-educated, marriage rates are stable and divorce is in decline. The reverse is true for those at the bottom of the educational ladder. These declining partnering rates among poorly qualified, low-income Australians correlate with the decline in Australian fertility.

This fact is completely at odds with the picture presented in the mainstream media. There, feature articles tend to stress the problems of career couples delaying child bearing - whereas, in fact, among all income groups, marriage almost always leads to children. The media stresses the problems of university-educated women complaining about the lack of suitable men. It is true there are more female graduates than male, but the problems of the low-income and unqualified in finding partners are much more severe. This gap, between media emphasis and reality, on its own suggests that there is truth in the derision heaped on the “media elite”. They dominate, and they are out of touch.

Australian university vice-chancellors have set a target date of 2020 by which time they want 60 per cent of Australians to possess higher-education qualifications. At present, only about 30 per cent of 19-year-olds are at university, which means unless
things change very quickly, or there is a massive intake of mature-age students, the vice-chancellors’ dreams are unlikely to be achieved. For the foreseeable future, the majority of Australia’s population will not be university-educated. Therefore elections will not be decided by those who have such an education. In a real sense, the future of Australia will not be about them.

This matters, because all the surveying and public opinion polling undertaken in Australia over the past 30 years suggests that when it comes to attitudes and political opinions, the presence or absence of tertiary education is the defining divide - more reliable than household income or notions of social class.

Education is “the proxy for class”, says Shaun Wilson of the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University. He has been involved in the ANU’s program of surveys of social attitudes, which represent the best available information on the opinions and attitudes of the Australian population.

After each election, the researchers at ANU send questionnaires at random to thousands of people on the electoral roll, asking for an enormous amount of personal information - education level, income, whether they live in the outer suburbs, inner suburbs or regions - together with questions on what they think about a range of social issues: How close do they feel to Australia? Should the Government cut taxes or spend more on social services? Are they in favour of more immigration? All this information, including the most recent survey, the 2003 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, is available on the internet. It is possible for any web surfer to cross-tabulate looking for differences and similarities between different political classes.

The data confirms the census findings that the spread of education is geographic, but gives more information on the differences between the inner and outer suburbs. In rural areas, only 34 per cent of the population have diplomas, degrees or above, and half of the population have only Year 12 high-school education or less. In the inner suburbs, the proportions are reversed. In the outer suburbs, the proportions of those with tertiary education is higher than in the regions (43 per cent with either a diploma or a degree) but it is still the case that the majority have only high-school education (44 per cent) or a trade qualification (13 per cent).

Some might see the fact that education is the most reliable predictor of different social attitudes as a cause for optimism, and evidence of the potential of social mobility. The commentator Gerard Henderson, for example, has argued that the most significant thing about Australia is not the divide between insiders and outsiders, but the fact that someone like Latham can become an insider, thanks to education, so easily. But the geographic spread of education prevents us from feeling too comfortable about this. In remote regional Australia, only 41 per cent of 16-year-olds are at school, compared with
84 per cent in the city. Any study of the performance of high schools, as measured by tertiary entrance scores, reveals that, despite some exceptions, the inner suburbs outperform the outer suburbs.

If education is the proxy for class, then class differences have become stubbornly localised. The inner suburbs of our major cities are the only places in the country where the tertiary-educated are in the majority. The further away you travel from the urban heart, the lower the numbers of highly educated people. With this come changes in political climate and in attitude towards some key political and social issues - the ones which the “chattering classes” tend to see as the measure of the nation’s moral health.

But the divide in attitudes is not “across the board”. On abortion, for example, attitudes are very similar. The ANU data shows that about 80 to 83 per cent favour a woman’s right to choose and this is consistent across geographic location and level of education. Levels of atheism are fairly consistent, too, though there is a slightly increased tendency for university graduates to say they have no religion.

Most respondents in the 2003 survey agreed that Australia should steer its own path in world affairs and that the United States had too much power. Responses were more or less uniform across educational and geographic divisions although there was a greater tendency for the university-educated to “strongly agree” that the US was too powerful. The 2003 survey also showed increasing support across the board for an end to tax cuts in favour of greater social spending. Only a minority favour lower taxes.

But on some issues - and it is the predictable ones, the ones at the heart of the so-called culture wars - the divide opens up.
Source: The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2003, analysed by Shaun Wilson
The survey asked whether respondents agreed or disagreed with the statement: “I would rather be a citizen of Australia than of any other country.” About 90 per cent of those with no tertiary education agreed or strongly agreed. For university graduates, the figure was only 78 per cent. It is still the case, of course, that a majority at all educational levels agreed, but it is reasonable to draw the conclusion that the university-educated are less likely to be firmly committed to Australia. It calls to mind all the conversations among my friends, in the wake of successive Howard Government victories, about the attractions of New Zealand.

Even more telling, when asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement, “There are some things about Australia today that make me feel ashamed of Australia”, the university-educated were the only ones with a majority - 63 per cent - agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement. Among the non-tertiary-educated, only 41 per cent agreed.

Asked specifically whether or not they were proud of Australia’s history, only 17.6 per cent of the university-educated said they were very proud, compared with 47 per cent of those with education to Year 12 or less. On asylum seekers, the tertiary-educated was the only category in which a majority did not agree that Australia should take stronger measures to exclude illegal immigrants.

For many years, public opinion polls have shown that one of the sharpest divides in Australia is on the desirable level of immigration. Attitudes fluctuate, depending on the state of the economy. Good times lead to more favourable attitudes; bad times usually cause an increase in opposition. But ever since the 1960s, there have been big differences depending on education levels. In the 2003 ANU survey, 41 per cent of university graduates thought immigration should be increased and another 36 per cent thought it should stay the same. For those with trade qualifications and high-school education, only about 17 per cent thought it should be increased, 33 per cent thought it should stay the same and 47 per cent thought it should be reduced.

The amount of data collected in the ANU surveys is mind-boggling. Generalisations are dangerous. Nevertheless it seems that the issues that divide us could be summed up as those of patriotism, national identity, immigration including asylum seekers, and attitudes to our history, including the past and present treatment of Aborigines. These are what Latham’s followers used to describe as the “totem issues” that caused the left wing of the party - the inner-suburban, educated supporters - to feel constantly betrayed by the party.

It seems to me that these issues are to do with notions of nationhood and fairness. They are to do with notions of us and them - who we are, who belongs, who does not and who is deserving of our help and compassion.
went back to Fountain Gate and the suburbs that make up the federal electorate of Holt. I started tuning to Radio 3AW, Melbourne’s top-rating station, as well as my usual ABC Radio National. During the research for this article, I read that researchers had found the Australian accent was disappearing, softening. This was easy to believe listening to the ABC, but on Radio 3AW talkback, it seemed a complete fiction. The voices were broad, colloquial. It was possible within seconds of turning on the radio to tell which station I was tuned to.

One morning, 3AW talkback radio host Neil Mitchell was discussing a story in that morning’s newspapers in which a senior teacher had suggested that he and his colleagues were failing to teach critical thinking, because people were still voting for Howard.

Mitchell interviewed teachers’ representatives who denied that they foisted propaganda on their students, but Mitchell was sceptical. “Let’s face it; we all know that it goes on.” He took a call from a man who complained that whenever his children were asked to comment on the media, the raw material handed out from the teacher always came from …

“I know, I know,” interrupted Mitchell. “Always from the ABC or The Age.”

It was assumed by Mitchell that this was evidence of left-wing bias. One caller accused Mitchell of right-wing bias. He did not deny it but said listeners were quite free to turn their radios off. He was not a teacher, in a position of power, able to inflict his views on captive students. He was not insidious.

I wandered the Fountain Gate shopping centre and accosted strangers. I announced myself as a journalist and asked questions like: “Have you heard of the culture wars?” and “Do you think there is a big divide between the inner suburbs and the rest of Australia?” and “What do you think of inner-city educated people?” Many people walked away without reply. Others shrugged, refused to engage. Most were friendly, and blank on the topic. Some were stereotypically hostile. “I want my children to go to university,” one said, “but I don’t want them becoming like them.” He meant “elite”.

When I asked one middle-aged woman what she thought of those who worked for asylum seekers, she said: “I don’t think they love their country. I don’t think they understand it.”

After a while, I caught a glimpse of how I and my kind appear, viewed from Fountain Gate. Mostly, I don’t think the people of Fountain Gate think about us much at all. This is perhaps the most important lesson. That most of Australian life is not about us.
When they do think of inner city educated classes, the picture that forms is a caricature. Nevertheless it is backed up, to some extent, by the statistics. Perception is not entirely out of kilter with reality.

Our concerns seem abstract, our morality a pose. We are seen as being less than patriotic, always carping about our country. We are suspected of being less committed to our families than decent folk. We do not have ordinary people’s passion for home and neighbourhood, family and country. We do not look very loveable, nor very loving; despite all our professed compassion for asylum seekers, Aborigines and other people we don’t know. Our talent for analysis and critique is not admired, but regarded with suspicion.

We appear corrosive.

So what is it about university education that causes people to change? We might like to think that it is an increased capacity for reason or for abstract thought. But other possibilities have been suggested.

There is another name for the chattering classes, the “elite”, the tourists or the insiders. It is the “new class”. This is a label that tends to raise hackles among the very people it describes, since it is usually employed by the right in the US as a term of derision.

Its origins, though, are post-Marxist. Given that the proletariat has failed to revolt, what is to replace the bourgeoisie? The answer, suggested the American sociologist Alvin Gouldner, is an intelligentsia whose wealth is not in property but “cultural capital”. This “new class” is challenging the bourgeoisie for social dominance. The marker of membership is a special way of using language - the “culture of careful and critical discourse”.

The rules of careful and critical discourse include that people making assertions must justify them, and that it is not enough to invoke authority, such as the Bible or Marx or one’s parents or (in our context) “this is the Australian way”. Speakers must try to persuade through argument. Gouldner says that this use of language unifies in much the same way as ordinary languages. Uneducated people have difficulty with careful and critical discourse. Educated people, particularly those trained in the humanities, are fluent.

In Australia, the “new class” idea has been most fully developed and explored by the sociologist Katharine Betts in her 1999 book The Great Divide (Duffy and Snellgrove), which examined the huge differences of opinion between university-educated people and others on immigration.
Betts describes the concept of the new class as fraught with contradictions. The culture of careful and critical discourse states that people's opinions should be assessed on the basis of argument. But the culture of critical discourse is used in a way at odds with this - to exclude "non-members". Rationality should be opposed to taboos yet, in fact, she claims, the new class has several of them. For example, for most of the past few decades it has been taboo to debate whether immigration levels are too high. This is why successive governments have been able to keep immigration high although a majority in the population has opposed the policy. Without educated people to organise protests and articulate arguments, popular feeling has remained largely unexpressed.

This is the power of the new class - to articulate and to advocate. But when something is taboo, there is no articulation.

Not all the conversation between those who are educated follows the rules of careful and critical discourse. Author Frank Moorhouse has written about how his friends - educated and articulate - engage in ritual "cussing", often of the Howard Government. Agreement is assumed. The discussion - or the "cussing" - is like a bonding ritual, rather than an argument. To disagree, or even to qualify, is to mark oneself as an outsider, not really part of the group. The rhetoric might be respect for critical discourse. The reality is orthodoxy.

Nor is the phenomenon confined to the left. More recently, Moorhouse has said that there is 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. I have observed a veritable appetite, say among some columnists, to oppose anything that 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 that 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 "soft-hearted" impulse in areas of indigenous people, illegal immigrants, feminism and so on."

What Moorhouse and Betts are drawing attention to is that, although facility with language and the ideology of rationality are the markers of the new class, there can be a significant gap between the rhetoric, the ideology and the practice. Why? Betts suggests that the new class can be more concerned with the markers of their new class status than with true rationality. The markers of class membership include having appropriately progressive opinions and, sometimes, an attitude of scorn for the aspirations of the workers who have "adapted to capitalism and its goods ... with their plaster gnomes, plastic flowers, china ducks and, now, their video recorders, cars, caravans and motor boats, their mass-produced goods and chattels, their attitudes and the cultural desert in which they live."
“People who are themselves recruited from relatively uneducated backgrounds and who experience difficulties finding work that meets their aspirations are likely to feel anxious about their status and to find it hard to establish new-found claims to esteem and respect. Their right to be considered members of an intelligentsia can demand a certain level of anxious vigilance,” Betts says.

She quotes Gouldner: “The new class sets itself above others, holding that its speech is better than theirs; that the examined life is better than the unexamined life which, it says, is sleep and no better than death. Even as it subverts old inequities, the new class silently inaugurates a new hierarchy of the knowing, the knowledgeable, the reflexive and insightful.”

Betts has catalogued some of the things intellectuals have said to deride their country. In 1966 and 1967, when the numbers of university-educated began their exponential growth, the literary magazine Meanjin ran a series of articles by prominent intellectuals under the heading “Godzone”. “Acquisitiveness and racialism are characteristic of pioneering societies, and Australia is no exception,” wrote Allan Ashbolt, the ABC broadcaster. “Behold the man - the Australian man of today - on Sunday mornings in the suburbs, when the high-decibel drone of the motor mower is calling the faithful to worship … He is a sentient being, but hardly rational or purposeful. His world is mass-produced and mass-manipulated, outside his own control. He is mortgaged to a full belly, the pretty pleasures of gadgetry, to second-hand sensations. At the age of 65, equipped with dashing sports coat, matching luggage, good wishes from the bowling club, and two P&O cruise tickets, he imagines that he is about to begin living, not knowing that he died many years before.”

There are many other examples. The suburbs - the places the intellectuals of the ’60s had mostly grown up in - were seen as boring at best, vacuous, mean and racist at worst.

Betts’ analysis puts the abuse heaped on “elites” in recent years in perspective. Since Howard came to power, the fire has been effectively returned. When Keating talked about his “Paris option”, when he was quoted as describing Australia as the arse-end of the world, when he wore his fancy Italian suits, he was in tune with a tradition of abuse of the suburbs and of the majority of Australians. He was proclaiming his membership of the new, educated class, rather than that from which he came. The fact that he was a Bankstown boy born to the working class did not alter this impression. If anything, it would have cemented it. Keating was a social climber.

His famous Redfern speech - moving, urgent, a word song - also resonated with the class theme of ambivalence for Australia. “… it was we who did the dispossessing. We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the disasters. The alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their
mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and our prejudice. And our failure to imagine these things being done to us.”

Four years after the Redfern speech came the voice of the reaction, the first time for many years that the outsiders had found an articulate - or semi-articulate - spokesperson. And it gave the lie to Keating’s use of the word “we”. In her maiden speech in Parliament, Pauline Hanson said: “I am fed up with being told, ‘This is our land’. Well, where the hell do I go? I was born here, and so were my parents and children … I draw the line when told I must pay and continue paying for something that happened over 200 years ago. Like most Australians, I worked for my land; no one gave it to me.”

It is often said that Howard appropriated Hanson’s approach and policies but, in fact, he had been well tuned in to the growing divide in Australian society long before her maiden speech. As Marian Sawyer and Barry Hindess point out in their introduction to Us and Them, Howard’s 1988 political manifesto “Future Directions” - the one with the family behind the white picket fence on the cover - was promoted by a jingle composed by Bryce Courtenay, titled Son, You’re Australian.

Never mind the fancy dancers
Plain-thinking men know their right from wrong
Don’t deal with silver tongues and chancers
Keep your vision clear and hold it strong.

I watched as things began to change around me
The fancy dancers got to have their say
They changed the vision, spurned the wisdom
And made Australia change to suit their way.

It’s time we cleansed the muddy waters
And do the things we know must be done
So that we teach our sons and daughters
What it means to be a true Australian.

When Keating won the 1993 election, he said in his triumphant speech: “This is a victory for the true believers.” I imagine in Holt, this would have sounded like: “This is a victory for people like Keating.” And so, in 1996, Howard won government with the motto: “For all of us”. The Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson has said he heard racism in this motto - for all of us but not for them. I think he is right, but it is also possible to read the “them” as being, not Aborigines or members of other races, but their new-class advocates.
In the wake of my essay on Latham, many of my friends argued against the insider-outsider analysis by pointing out that they themselves had come from families in which they were the first people to go to university. The rapid increase in university education during our lifetimes means that most of the current generation of intellectuals have come from families where university education was not the norm.

I accepted my friends’ arguments at the time and I still think they have a point. Latham’s divide is not as simple or as extreme as he has suggested. But I also think that the connections between insiders and outsiders - the closeness and recentness of the split - is actually part of the dynamic and part of the reason that the two sides find it so hard to approach and empathise with each other.

The divides are in the nature of a family argument. Everyone knows that family disputes are the most heartfelt, the most hurtful and sometimes the most bitter. Viewed from Fountain Gate, university-educated inner-city dwellers with progressive opinions can seem to be little better than snobs. We seem a bit ridiculous - social climbers, concerned with the markers of our status, just as much as those who build their beautifully maintained McMansions on the edge of the city.

Every time we use our facility with language, our access to media and airwaves to push our world view, to demonise Howard, to describe those who voted for him as selfish, racist or materialistic, we fit like a glove over these impressions.

Or perhaps we don’t, because increasingly we speak only to ourselves.

I rang Katharine Betts after reading her book. Surely, I said, this mechanistic analysis cannot be the whole of it. Surely our opinions are not just fashion - not just social climbing. When we do it well - when we don’t fall prey to peer pressure, taboo and intellectual fashion - surely the culture of careful and critical discourse does lead to better decision making, and even better people. Surely the examined life is better than the unexamined? Surely we are right to think as we do. I could hear the echo of my friend’s words, and I winced. “We are morally superior.”

Betts dealt with me calmly. “Of course education is good,” she said. Of course the inner-city lefties are genuinely convinced of the rightness of their causes and, of course, this imposes an obligation on them to argue as vigorously as possible for their point of view. “But when we switch from arguing against something to saying that those who disagree with us are horrible, racist and so on, then we are failing. It is a deep failure, particularly for those with the benefits of tertiary education.”
“We are status-seeking creatures,” Betts says. It doesn’t mean that our views are not genuine. It doesn’t necessarily mean that we are wrong. It does mean that sometimes, when we debate these issues, we are prone to abandon rationality and civility. We hold our views for a mixture of reasons - partly because we are part of a group that thinks as we do and which would exclude us if we thought differently, partly because we are convinced through rational debate.

Betts doesn’t say this, but I think it follows from her argument. Our moral outrage at the views of the majority of Australians on asylum seekers and the other “totem issues” is not only about our concern for others. It is also a marker of our own anxiety.

Some of the “totem issues”, perhaps most notably Aboriginal disadvantage, concern things about which inner-city lefties have little experience and knowledge. It is hard to see how rationality alone could lead to “progressive” opinions about, for example, the rights and wrongs of the abolition of ATSIC. The assumption seems to be that the “others” - Howard and his supporters - are racist, therefore all their actions must be motivated by racism. We are therefore necessarily superior, and correct.

Betts believes the response to the Boxing Day tsunami shows Australians don’t lack heart. “It is possible to be deeply concerned about border control because of fears that people will crash in and take advantage of us, whether or not those fears are justified, and still be prepared to be generous when you think people are deserving.”

She suggests the comparison is the same as being approached by a beggar whose personal situation you don’t know and who may be a fraud, and giving to a charity you know and trust. People are frightened of being taken advantage of by people who are not one of us.

Viewed from a distance, the electorate of Holt collapses into apparent uniformity. As I walked around, it soon became clear to me that there are two Holts, and at least two groups of outsiders.

I took my dog to give me an excuse to walk along deserted suburban streets. Around Cranbourne there were small houses, sometimes on big blocks. In the backyards, sheds bulged and spewed collections of junk. Front yards appeared to be outdoor workshops for the maintenance of old cars. The parks and gardens had daisies and dandelions growing knee high. This was the old Holt - working class, poor, not manicured. The polling booths in this area still recorded a solid Labor vote, though with a small swing to Howard. Oddly, in the lack of attention to outward appearance, the houses here bore more resemblance to the slapdash exterior of my own inner suburban residence than the new housing estates around Fountain Gate. There was the occasional lovingly tended
garden but, for the most part, outward appearance was clearly not a priority. These people were not social climbers. Markers of status were not important.

Just a little to the north, I came across one of the most prestigious of the new housing estates of Narre Warren. Built on what used to be the home of the Melbourne Hunt Club, it sits directly across the highway from the humble run-down houses of the still Labor-voting working class. The Hunt Club estate prides itself on being different. It is a “master planned estate”, planned by the developers, the Dennis Family Corporation, whose staff remains on site, putting out newsletters and encouraging the new home buyers to join the residents’ association to “make a difference, get involved in building community spirit and represent the Hunt Club residents within the wider community”. Community is a selling point. It becomes part of the sales team’s job to organise it.

I picked up the advertising brochure. It began with Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s famous love sonnet.

How do I love thee?
Let me count the ways.

The poem continued through the pamphlet. What was there to love about the Hunt Club? “It’s the details that sing the story. From stonework that acknowledges the Hunt Club’s rich heritage to indented parking bays that make parking safer and enhance traffic flows, to mature trees that instantly create a striking environment. All combining to create an estate you’ll be proud to own a part of.”

I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.

The features of the estate included rolled lawn to “create an immediate impression of order, establishment and pride of ownership. Lifestyle is the number one priority.”

I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.

“Central to the master planning of the Hunt Club is the goal of creating a community of proud homeowners … You will be sure to make new friends at the Hunt Club, because people moving here are people like you - attracted to a convenient and secure family environment with an established feel.”

A Sydney sociologist has done some fine research on where the people who buy into these estates come from and why they do so. Most, she found, had come from nearby suburbs and many from those areas that had borne the brunt of immigration. They were
working class, working their way up. The residents were very concerned to delineate their new homes from the suburbs that surrounded them. Crucial to this was the planned nature of the estates and the amount of care others took of their homes. One of her informants said: “The children here are very polite. They talk to you. [It’s] because of the quality of the people. See the houses as you drove in? People take pride in their houses. If you take pride in the house, you will take pride in your children.” The communities, the sociologist said, “offered residents a sense of coherence and social order and a degree of control over their physical and social environment”. The rules of belonging in these communities provided “an anchor for communal and, consequently, individual identity”. Us and them.

There is a nice irony to this study of what motivates the aspirationals - the once working-class folk who can no longer be counted on to vote for Labor. The sociologist who did this study is Gabrielle Gwyther. She is the former wife of Mark Latham, who led the Labor Party for those tumultuous months of 2004, before retreating behind his high suburban gates at the beginning of 2005.

Outside a music shop in the Fountain Gate shopping mall there was a big television screen showing Casey Donovan, the latest winner of Channel 10’s *Australian Idol* talent quest, singing her signature song - chosen for her by the canny organisers of the show - *Listen with your Heart*.

Just 16, overweight, a smoker, Aboriginal and living in a step-family, Donovan is not the sanitised kind of pop star one might expect to emerge from such a national popularity contest. But it is worth noting that none of the recent winners has been what one would expect. In 2002, Guy Sebastian won. He was a member of the Assemblies of God church in Adelaide that spawned the political party Family First. Last year, *Australian Idol* attracted many more viewers than the debate between Howard and Latham during the federal election. Latham won that debate but Howard and Donovan won the bigger competitions.

The issues of *Girlfriend* and *Dolly* I had been immersing myself in were full of news and views about Donovan. Should she lose weight and quit smoking now she was an Idol? the magazines asked their readers. The letters published were in sharp disagreement. Some thought she should change because she was now a role model. Others said they had voted for her because of who she was. She should just keep on singing and never change. She proved that “anyone can do it”.

At Fountain Gate, Donovan was on full volume, and she has a big voice. On a domestic television set, you don’t get the full force of *Australian Idol*. In Fountain Gate on the big screen, it was clear the contestants had big voices, big ambitions, big feelings. The
song began with Donovan sitting on an old vinyl couch in what might be a cell. She is surrounded by bare concrete walls and is watching a video of herself as a child, tumbling and playing. She sings:

When you can’t find your way through the night
When you’ve lost touch and nothing’s feeling right
You can’t find that path that leads you on
And you don’t know which road to choose …

She rises from the couch and walks over to a window. She looks out on a blue sky studded with fluffy clouds, and as she sings the concrete walls begin to change around her.

Listen with your heart
Listen to your soul
Inside you’ll find the answer
The place you need to go

Painted flowers and leaves are growing up the concrete. Then the concrete is cracking. She is free. The walls dissolve. She stands among fairy lights outdoors at night, belting out her song:

And when this world has got your mind confused
And when your faith has gone and run out on you
You can’t find that faith in your soul
You don’t know which road to choose
That’s when you’ve got to

Listen with your heart …

The song winds down, Donovan returns to the couch, the cell and the television.

We all lose our way sometimes
We all lose our faith sometimes
If you just believe and just be strong your heart will take you home.

I had heard something like this before, I realised. It was in the jingle Bryce Courtenay had written for the Liberal Party back in 1988 - the one that talked about the “fancy dancers, the “silver tongues” and “chancers”. The Liberal Party had also identified that Australians might be feeling lost and confused, and urged Australians to:

Keep your vision clear and hold it strong.
They might as well have said: “Listen with your heart.”

The difference was that in Donovan’s world, there were no enemies. She was concerned with finding her way and not losing her faith. She didn’t worry about the “fancy dancers”.

It seems significant to me that the signature tunes of all the top contestants in *Australian Idol* over the past two years have not been standard love songs, but rather expressions of faith. Several have had religious themes. They are songs about being lost, but finding your way. They are about having faith, mostly in yourself. The themes of the songs of the ’70s - “poor me” laments lost love - seem to have faded away. The songs of *Australian Idol* are intensely optimistic. In an odd way, they are grown-up songs. They imply taking responsibility for oneself rather than blaming others.

They are not, of course, to do with rationality. One doesn’t expect to find the culture of careful and critical discourse in popular music. The culture of *Australian Idol* is about faith, not reason. It is about heart, not head.

People at Fountain Gate were passing by Donovan on the screen without a second look but, as people do, when they approached they seemed to begin to move subtly in time with the music. Donovan was surrounded by mundane shopping-centre things, and all the messages of consumption. But the messages were not in conflict with her. It all seemed to be part of the same song.

In the chemist shop across the way, there was a big display for Nicorette patches and another for slimming products. In the bookshop, Paul Jennings’s book on encouraging your child to read was given pride of place, accompanied by *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* and its predictable sequel, *The 8th Habit*.

A poster was strung across the chemist-shop window. It read: “Improve Yourself”. It was meant as a catch-all promotion for the Nicorette patches, the slimming aids and the cosmetics. But for a moment it felt as though someone had written up my thoughts. It could have been an articulation of the underlying imperative of Fountain Gate, of the Hunt Club, of *Australian Idol*. And even of education. Of social climbers of all kinds.

Improve yourself.

I left Fountain Gate, hit the Monash Freeway and just 45 minutes later was in the inner suburbs. There were no huge shopping facades, no giant plasma screens, no stirring lyrics. In the cafe where I stopped for lunch there was gentle music playing - clearly “ethnic”, and nothing I had ever heard before. Its attractiveness relied on it being exotic.

On the wall were posters inviting me to attend concerts, plays, “experiences” and “installations”. Around me everyone was reading or talking. I couldn’t spot the message
here. I couldn’t see the belief, the underlying narrative, in this suburb. I was at home, inside the goldfish bowl, and therefore invisible to myself. I wondered how we would look to a resident of Holt, fish out of water, walking by. Probably my face would have seemed unreadable. Closed.

Improve yourself. How might it apply to people like me, to the derided “elite”? Listening with our hearts obviously won’t be enough. Being who we are, we have to examine with our minds and our words. Perhaps, therefore, it is fitting and proper that we are adversaries to majority opinion. It is the inevitable role of the cultural elite to articulate the things that need saying, including the ones that very few want to hear. But do we have to be enemies as well? Perhaps we need not be only corrosive.

John Howard, I think, has been concerned with depictions of our history and our national identity because he has heeded the old cliché - that history is written by the victors. I would put a different construction on this. Those who write history are the victors. They achieve their victory through the act of articulation, through weaving a narrative out of the events of various lives. Now, for the first time since the 1960s, the dominant narrative of the cultural elite has been challenged.

It is no longer clear what the narrative of Australia is about, or how it should be regarded. I suspect that if my kind want to be part of the narrative’s unfolding, we will have to be both humble and secure enough to realise that the story is not mainly about us, but is nevertheless ours to tell.

Note on sources: Data analysed by Shaun Wilson, Centre for Social Research, RSSS, Australian National University, based on The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2003.

Sean Scalmer and Murray Goot’s excellent paper is “Elites constructing elites: News Limited Newspapers 1996-2002”. It appears in Us and Them - Anti-Elitism in Australia, edited by Marian Sawer Marian and Barry Hindess ((API Network, Curt University of Technology). Demographic data on the City of Casey and the City of Melbourne, including Carlton, is drawn from the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001 Census, as analysed on the respective councils’ websites. The research on partnering rates was done by Bob Birrell, Virginia Rapson and Clare Hourigan and was published as Men + Women Apart - Partnering in Australia, published by the Australian Family Association and the Centre for Population and Urban Research, Monash University, 2004. I am indebted to Andrew Norton for the point about the small chances of vice-chancellors’ ambitions being met. The Australian National University’s Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2003 is available, with a great deal of other data, at http://assda224-100.anu.edu.au/nestarlight/index.jsp. Gerard Henderson made his point about Mark Latham becoming an insider in “Latham has turned outside in” in The Sydney Morning Herald, September 28, 2004. Katharine Betts’ book The Great Divide, from which much of the argument about the “new class” is drawn, was published by Duffy and Snellgrove in 1999. Frank Moorhouse’s comments were made in the 2001 Stephen Murray-Smith Memorial Lecture. I am indebted to Dennis Glover, former speechwriter to Mark Latham, for the point that there are two sides to Holt’s “outsiders”. Gabrielle Gwyther’s analysis is “Paradise planned: socio-economic differentiation and the master planned community on Sydney’s urban fringe”, a paper delivered at the University of Western Sydney’s State of Australian Cities national conference in 2003.