

'It's *Déjà vu* All Over Again': Behind *The Eye's* Collapse

R.J. STOVE

NO-ONE who chooses the heartbreaking, bank-manager-defying, ulcer-inducing, addictive task of creating a periodical gloats over rivals' flops. To such a person, a variant of Donne's aphorism applies: 'Every magazine's death diminishes me.' And yet to feel diminished is not to have one's prophetic powers vaporized; some magazines seem to beg for the early death that duly claims them. Latest addition to that cemetery for Australia's independent publications—where *The Republican*, *The Independent Monthly*, *Follow Me Gentlemen*, and *Soundscapes* now rest—is *The Eye*, which on 26 April breathed its last.

The surprise is that it lasted six months. For three decades its chief backer, John Singleton, has proclaimed with beery relish his disregard for any higher principle than the aggrandizement of John Singleton. To start a magazine on the basis of such a being's assurances that his goodwill shall survive for five consecutive days is to announce in ringing tones one's own suicidal mania.

But a periodical, if good enough, can survive even a Singleton commandeering its kitty. What doomed *The Eye* was the same disease that finished off *The Republican*: an almost total inability to publish anything different from the nihilistic bromides available in *Good Weekend* or *Sunday Life!* for one-fifth of the cover price. As early as 8 April, Tim Blair complained to *Daily Telegraph* readers of *The Eye's* insistence on 'the same cosy leftism of most of the press in Australia'. P.P. McGuinness's *Sydney Morning Herald* column of 6 May was substantially more acerbic:

The most remarkable fact about *The Eye* was that from the first issue it was boring ... at no time did it ever look like challenging any of the comfortable orthodoxies of the chattering class.

Most astringent of all was Max Teichmann in *News Weekly's* 20 May issue, reprehending *The Eye* for what he called:

yuppie left sentiments we know so well—but which can be found in so many other literary and media enclaves, where the deadly nightshade of inner suburban boredom, fruits of social and intellectual inbreeding, flourish.

From its outset, *The Eye* harrumphed editorially about its eagerness to run stories that the big boys didn't dare touch. So how did it fulfil this enticing promise? It spent issue after issue on such deeply unfamiliar topics as the 'stolen generation', the monarchy's vileness, Howard's craven refusal to say sorry, the prison system's shortage of creature comforts, the artistic magnificence of *Sex and the City*, and Sydney versus Melbourne ill-will. With superb poetic justice, it slapped on its final issue's cover the face of Nicole Kidman. As that linguistically challenged baseball hero Yogi Berra once commented, 'It's *déjà vu* all over again.' If all this constituted *The Eye's* notion of path-breaking originality, may heaven preserve us from its notion of copy-cattling. (Actually, heaven didn't. *The Eye's* notorious October cover depicting a pistol pointed at a corgi—'Vote Yes [in the republic referendum] or the dog gets it!'—Turned out to be plagiarized, with only minuscule emendations, from America's *Spy*.)

Yet far more significant than *The Eye's* actual contents, purloined or otherwise, is the larger question that Australia's magazine graveyard raises: whether any periodical can survive in this country without Murdoch, Packer, Fairfax or (as with *24 Hours*) ABC graft. Answering this enquiry necessitates demolishing several myths about local magazines that have become much more tenacious than most of the magazines themselves.

Myth 1: Writers don't matter. *The Eye's* adherence to this delusion was quite embarrassing enough, but nowhere exceptional. Kenneth Davidson's Canberra periodical *Dissent* takes such scorn for the authorial function to its logical end: it combines bellyaching about capitalist greed with a refusal to pay its own contributors at all. Whatever *Dissent* understands by 'economic justice', economic justice for *Dissent* staff clearly represents no part of it.

Myth 2: Australia's population is too small to support quality journalism. Yeah, right. Which presumably explains why serious periodical publication flourishes (by Australian standards) in the Benelux countries, Scandinavia and New Zealand, none of which have anything like as many people as Australia does. *The Spectator's* loyal, impressive *per capita* Australian audience indicates that, mythomaniacs' insistence to the contrary, Australians *will* buy magazines that are not mere clones of tabloids.

Myth 3: Australia's libel laws make quality journalism impossible. Without denying such laws' bone-headed malice, one must appreciate that José Rizal's epigram fits ▶

The Stolen Generations

MICHAEL DUFFY

judicial tyranny at least as well as narrowly political tyranny: 'There are no tyrants where there are no slaves.' In the libel field, as in every other area where legal lunacy prevails, we shall never get sane laws until we dare risk imprisonment for breaking insane laws. That *some* libel laws must remain is undeniable: abolish all legal redress against gutter-journalistic calumny, and you simply grant unlimited power to lupine spivs like Bob Ellis.

Myth 4: Quality journalism depends on statutory guarantees of free speech. Ah yes, statutory guarantees. So brilliantly successful in safeguarding religious freedom under Stalin and Brezhnev (both of whom wrote such freedom into their respective Soviet constitutions). And so efficacious in America, where the First Amendment allegedly ensures that anyone can utter anything. Tell that to Atlanta's most famous citizen, John Rocker, whose incautious late-1999 references to New York ethnic and sexual minorities elicited howls of media outrage (including chillingly totalitarian demands that Rocker undergo 'sensitivity training') as demented as anything Blainey's candour inspired here. Invaluable though the First Amendment is to, say, your average TV director wanting to devote entire screenplays to iterations of the C-word, it extends precious few practical rights to Americans in general.

Rather than perpetuate all these preposterous legends, Australians dreaming of creating an antipodean *Spectator* or *New Republic* would do better to realize that independent journalism needs to mean exactly what it says. There are any number of stories to which a genuinely bold Australian editor could devote such a magazine and triumph, confident that the big boys will indeed fear to touch them. When, exactly, are we going to see them in print?

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T P A

THE transnational human rights industry appears to be setting up Australia as the next international white pariah, the South Africa of the new century. As we approach the Sydney Olympic Games in September, with the possibility of Aboriginal demonstrations before the world's cameras, many Australians are becoming increasingly nervous about this. Others find it terribly exciting.

Last month the conservative government of Prime Minister John Howard was chastised by the United Nations' Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. At issue was mandatory sentencing in northern Australia, where judges must send offenders to prison for certain offences.

According to the Committee, this system 'appeared to target offences that were committed disproportionately by indigenous Australians, leading to a racially divisive impact on their rate of incarceration.' In other words, blacks commit more crime, so they go to gaol more than whites. And this is racist.

Racism is an extraordinarily potent issue in Australian politics these days. Although only about 2 per cent of people are Aborigines, issues involving them have become one of the main points of difference between the two major political parties. The latest explosion occurred earlier this month over a phenomenon known colloquially as 'the stolen generations', which is now the predominant racial issue in the country.

In the first 60 or so years of the twentieth century, some mainly part-

Aboriginal children were separated from their parents and in most cases brought up in church institutions or boarding schools. 'Bringing Them Home', the report of a government inquiry in the 1990s, found that this occurred to between 10 and 30 per cent of all Aborigines, and that the predominant motivation was racial assimilation. It concluded that, as the ultimate purpose was to 'breed out the colour' and destroy the Aboriginal race (it was assumed full-bloods would die off anyway), the practice amounted to genocide. This inquiry received an enormous amount of publicity and, building on other concerns about Aboriginal well-being, has created an atmosphere of enthusiastic shame surrounding the public discussion of Aboriginal issues.

The problem is that there appears to be little truth in almost any of this. The inquiry's attempts to identify how many children were separated were futile, but 10 per cent was probably the top of the range rather than the bottom. (This is the figure provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.) The inquiry did not interview any of the officials involved in the separations. They have subsequently come forward and helped establish that the motivation of the separations was often welfare, not racial assimilation. For instance, some tribes in the late 1940s refused to accept the children born of liaisons between black women and Australian or American servicemen during the war. So their mothers asked the welfare people to take the children to church homes to be brought up.

REVIEW