KATE FISCHER, JOHN HOWARD AND SHRINKING VOICES IN THE FIELD OF SOCIAL ACTION

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At a public forum hosted by Derryn Hinch for Channel 9, I found myself inadvertently wrestling with Kate Fischer over the role of the public intellectual. Kate was part of a panel which included Sam Newman and the Cappers, called in and dressed up to discuss ‘The Battle of the Sexes’ with a studio audience, amongst whom were seated various advocates for the feminist and men's movements. Yet the discussion seemed mostly to turn around heterosexual rituals of dating (Sam and Kate’s), marriage (The Capper’s) - and some hapless fellow was encouraged to try out a truly dreadful line on Kate about whether she’d seen a tree and if not, how about a root?

A few still and waterless looks began to be passed between those of us who had come to talk about gender relations, until finally I commandeered a microphone and put it to the public, the panel and TV cameras, that there were some pressing issues in terms of women's status - like violence - that surely were worth mentioning. Kate didn't think so. She rolled her large moist eyes, looked at her watch and demanded that I direct a question to the panel. ‘We're the panel and you're the public, you’re supposed to ask us questions’, she said, a bit sniffily. I replied that I was happy to make a statement, which she interrupted again with ‘Question’, and I returned with ‘Statement’, and so it went on until she pointed to a raised hand in the back row.

The microphone was taken out of my hand and I wondered if I had just experienced the edge of a shrinking field available to the advocate of social change. I even thought, a little vengefully I admit, that the commercial media was digging its own grave, in imagining 'the public' was so stupid. New opportunities for looking were sprouting before their viewer's eyes; they would lose the monopoly on home-based media forms and through the paucity of their own imaginations die out like dinosaurs. Yet John Howard thinks that the ABC should
be more like the commercial stations and, for instance, focus ‘less’ on Aboriginal and multi-cultural issues. I don’t believe that public intellectuals can be thought of outside their conditions of possibility; these conditions are the dominant media, fame and, more recently, the conservative, silencing, disempowering vision of the present government. Firstly, I want to talk about fame.

It seems that Kate Fischer and I had some pretensions in common, loosely based around ideas of an authoritative voice and presumptions over a public fascination with the celebrity. It was little wonder that we became antagonistic, for these unexamined aspects of the public intellectual - the authoritative voice and the celebrity - come into conflict. As long as public intellectuals - be they academics, social commentators, community activists and advocates or freelance writers - are speaking through visual and aural technologies, the conditions of their voice and image, the mechanisms through which they are conveyed, are material and integral to what they say and how they are seen. They are also ‘recognised’ through the communication technologies that have constructed, since the end of the last century, our shared ideas about Western fame. And fame is not an innocent category of self-representation; it applies differently to gender and race, it provides authority and influence, it is politically invested.

Public intellectuals seem caught between a rock and a hard place in that their ideas, information and opinions as ideas, information and opinions, are preferred in disembodied form, standing on their own. But these ideas are confused by the subjective interruptions of voice inflection, accent, ways of dressing and the myriad identity alignments these traits and others give away in terms of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and even political tendentiousness. Despite the public intellectual being required to be a disembodied authoritative voice, as embodied people this voice is often thrown back on themselves and they become celebrities. This needn’t matter, except that fame, as I have said, is not innocent. It has requirements for novelty, appeal, and elements of shock, it is transitory and highly mediated by a sort of cultural and political favouritism in terms of who it bestows its attention upon. It is also the
pinnacle of legitimisation in Western culture, a kind of visibility that even for 15 minutes permits illusions of cultural significance, personal worth, and a technologically enabled immortality. It is a seduction that can mutate ordinary people into unforgivably omnipresent, righteous bores, whose specialist fields turn to liquid gold and drool out over all disciplines and analytic domains, devouring lived experience that has not been granted for public consumption. Fame is pleasure and sometimes public intellectuals swim about in it like wees in a toddler's bathing pool - barely disguised and surprisingly warm.

There are two ways I might have come to hold these beliefs; either through watching-with a fair degree of distaste - public intellectuals, or through having experienced myself, with rather too much pleasure, 15 minutes of fame or public visibility. Without meaning to turn this into a series of confessions, it is the latter I want to reflect on. I will argue that in order to advocate community politics it is crucial to understand ‘fame’ as a device which the dominant media uses to lazily construct an ever-ready oppositional voice/entity. Fame also reflects an awareness that the personal legitimization it affords involves a kind of seduction.

In 1991, after acting as a counsellor/advocate at the Bendigo Sexual Assault Centre, I watched Channel 7 promoting a telemovie with shots of a stripper running a feather boa between her legs. ‘Yeah, yeah, bore me brainless’, I thought, not without irritation, until the panting male voice-over announced: ‘She's hot, sexy and seductive, the madman's perfect victim’. With a peculiar calm that irritation turned to white heat and I formed the Coalition Against Sexual Violence Propaganda. Once the ‘coalition’ part was formed we went to action over similar ‘raping-is-great-rooting-for-real-blokes-and-don't-the-girls-love-it’ dominant media crappola. Because our actions centred around specific representations of women, and we conceived representation as uses of language, we also responded to public statements like those of Judge Bollen. As the spokesperson, I got a lot of media attention. I was irreverent and angry and used swear words on camera, and the
media seemed to think I was either ‘talent’, or made up good ‘sound bites’, or perhaps was suitably naive.

The CASVP was attempting to create an alternative feminist approach to representations of women, particularly representations of violence against women which left us, variously, loving it, deserving it, or utterly and irredeemably entrapped by it. We were not ‘alternative’ in being feminist, we were alternative in rejecting the approaches of anti-porn feminism and in being informed by other feminist critiques of anti-porn feminism. Yet the media seemed to have pretty set ideas about what feminists say about explicit and sexualised images of women, and I was stupid enough to allow myself to be whipped into long pavement debates with journalists who then edited themselves out of view, leaving me arguing through the same tired tropes of representational violence. My admission here is that this stupidity was born from the distinct pleasure, seduction and legitimation that goes along with being asked to comment, to appear, to debate, to say Hi to Mum (the last being an exaggeration meant to be evocative).

I found it difficult to be interpreted outside the ruts of common-place perceptions of feminism in most of these media appearances, apart from the notable and challenging exceptions of Radio National and 3CR. The porn debate was brokered by a system of inflexible placements which included criminology, socio-biology, anti-porn feminism, liberal individualism and late-capitalist media entrepreneurialism. The debate could not incorporate the variations within feminisms or understand that indeed at this time porn was one of the major points of divergence for white western feminism. It also foundered over any approach that did not address itself to causality and censorship (the first being the only basis for the latter), and a feminist perspective that believed this focus distracted from the construction of gendered meaning within representations and its ‘regimes of viewing’ women. And indeed, since we were talking about pictures, a bit of representational theory surely had some relevance, yet was unable to be incorporated.

Speaking of pictures, there was an odd disjunction in appearing and speaking publicly about representations of
women while being represented as a young woman. Jackboots and overalls were attributed to me by one Herald-Sun columnist (so, in gold I painted ‘JACK’ over the toes of my high lace-up boots). I was at once unrecognisable as a feminist - because I wore lipstick and dyed my hair - or was introduced as a ‘leading feminist’ (which startled me) or was told that I had done extensive work on sexual harassment, when I had not done any at all.

I became aware of a crucial distinction between voice and entity, and I noticed that this distinction also tended to mark out worthwhile media from unmitigated rubbish. As the CASVP finished up and I was no longer a representative voice of a bloc of apparent consensus and social influence, the over role of entity was still sometimes offered up to me; in the absence of one, the other stood out in stark relief. When program researchers phoned to ask if I would talk on an issue pertaining to women and I instead passed on the names of women who I knew had worked for years on these issues, they never phoned them. They didn’t want knowledge, they wanted a dependable feminist entity. I began to be asked to take part in debates on the republic (on which I had done no more than the most obvious thinking) and even on geriatric driving. Despite the seduction I started to say no. Ultimately, the construction of entities who are representative of an undifferentiated block of thinking like ‘what women think’, means that specialist knowledge and difference is disavowed and less and less is known.

The effectiveness of community politics needs to be rethought and new strategies employed when these politics are conveyed to the public through communication technologies. Concentration of media ownership inevitably limits viewpoints, and hegemonises and ‘de-radicalises’ unfamiliar ideas and counter-discourses. For instance, sometimes journalists seemed to see themselves as a digestive film between ‘the public’ and ‘the intellectual’ in terms of instinctively understanding what the public could handle. On the one hand there were journalists who seemed personally committed to informing the public of new things in new or different ways, thereby proposing a kind of ongoing critical thinking. It still strikes me that for these
women and men there was no apparent distinction to be made between ‘the public’ and ‘the intellectual’, least of all by themselves. Yet on the other hand I met journalists who thought ‘the public’ could only handle what they already knew. I was asked to throw paint at billboards for Hardcore, or Real Life (always looking for a spectacle), or to talk about Madonna’s sex book and refused, explaining that I might as well appear on the billboard as appear on their program. I was interviewed by grey bearded anti-feminist hysterics who really had me on their program as a sounding-board against which they could bounce off, ensuring with their ducking devices that they countenanced no interruptions. Given that I was there to be interviewed, not getting a word in seemed like cruddy journalism to me. And needless to say, I had no sense of humour, was sexually repressed and was politically correct. (Do radio hosts and journalists have no politics to which they are correct? Evidently, they have that in common with the Queensland Firearm Association. It seems there is no politics or ideology unless it is oppositional). Truth newspaper also threatened to sue because the CASVPhad undermined their reputation with false allegations and caused them offence. Censorship takes many forms, aside from state intervention and classificatory systems. There are also language barriers and the cultural invisibility of marginalisation - legal bullying, we discovered, is another.

Finally, I want to talk about the more underhanded forms of censorship currently being enacted by the Howard and Kennett governments. There are some curious and suspicious parallels I would draw between some of the constraints of dominant media discussed above, and the Howard Government’s approach to ‘political correctness’, Aboriginality, multiculturalism and the ABC. It seems that the present Liberal Government has lost a consciousness of itself as being political; only oppositional voices are political (‘politically correct’) and therefore ideological. The Liberal Government on the other hand has a monopoly on common sense, and, of course, a mandate - being what the people want, being what they want. They may have lost this political self-consciousness through a pre-election process of disguising themselves as the Labour party, in effect a kind of Trojan horse from which they then
burst snarling, post-election. But instead of showing their true-blue colours they have reverted to something that belongs outside the political spectrum, or at least should - namely political vandalism.

Since I earlier committed myself to discussing the conditions of visibility for the advocate of community politics or the public intellectual and the effectiveness of that role, it would seem remiss not to mention the undermining, through funding cuts, of the two institutions from which they mainly spring: community welfare services and academia. And without being conspiratorialist, it is striking to me that my exposure to ideas committed to social change and to social change movements, has been through the very departments that will doubtlessly be hit hardest, such as women's studies, and student newspapers. Furthermore, it is precisely these areas that first bridge the leap between personal ideas and political action, from talking to yourself to writing something to be read.

There is a palpable despair that can be found amongst people of my generation, who grew up during the Cold War. We find resonance in ideas like ‘the world is dying’, as Leunig put it recently. If there is a conceptual tag, apart from vandalism, that we can attach to the present government, it is disempowerment. This disempowerment is going to be particularly effective against those who are marginalised and/or have grown up under a mantle of social decay and impending doom, that is, those most likely to complain. A sense of losing a field of action accompanies this government's every move; its strategy of silencing dissent is made through compounding the despair of the disenfranchised. When this apathy is made manifest, for instance, in unemployed kids like the Paxtons, they are feasted upon mercilessly and parasitically in this climate of blaming and loathing all who are not ‘winners’. Through this insidious rhetoric of the ‘winner’, Kennett and Howard have constructed a greedy cultural imagination. This could create a generation that believes that if they back a ‘winner’ and ignore ‘losers’ they will visualise themselves into a similar position. Perhaps from my Cold War upbringing of living on a nuclear precipice, or the impending sense of closure of the millennia, or environmental disaster, I feel more than saddened by anti-
Aboriginality, attacks on multi-culturalism, increased tonnage of woodchip exports, censoring of the ABC - the most influential public arena of dialogue and complex discussion in the country - and the regressive course of self-advancement rhetorically disguised as 'incentive' and 'opportunity'. I feel apocalyptic. It seems this government's mandate is to push us over the precipice.

I'm taking for granted that public intellectuals evolve into this role through a sense of the effectiveness of their own voice in bringing about social change. And this is one of the last residual traces of my idealism, though in the present climate I am hanging on to the conviction that to despair is to succumb. The public intellectual or community advocate cannot use the media as an effective tool for change until it is examined as their condition of possibility. The distinction between voice and entity, fame and hegemonic media - these are rough hewn ideas needing refinement and inviting challenge. But the insidious silencing techniques of the Howard and Kennett governments, and their cynical use of spectacle and media to coerce a worldview in accordance with their own, is, along with concentrated media, the field of action before us now.