For my fourteenth birthday my parents gave me a small paperback by someone called Hugh Stretton. I’d never heard of Hugh Stretton and the book looked very enigmatic and not very exciting. It was called _Ideas for Australian Cities_. I opened it to find, amid the text, some maps and alternative plans for parts of Melbourne, Canberra, Sydney and Adelaide.

Now this was more exciting. At fourteen I was very interested in the ways towns were set out, and I spent my spare time drawing alternative plans for all the towns we had ever lived in on large sheets of paper my parents smuggled home from the art department at the school where they worked. When I stopped looking at the pictures and began to read, I became even more excited.

It hit me that Hugh Stretton wasn’t just an isolated individual who happened to be interested in Australian cities, but
was one of a group of people who thought and wrote about such things. I knew this because in the book he entered into debates and discussed other people’s ideas as well as his own. What’s more, they seemed to do it for a living. As a lower-middle-class kid who grew up in country towns, I figured that there were people who planned towns and designed bridges and made laws and thought up ideas, but I’d never met any of them. We knew no academics, lawyers, planners or engineers. As I read *Ideas for Australian Cities* I felt for the first time that I was in touch with that group of people whose job it is to think about the different aspects of how society works. The book gave me my first glimpse inside the workings of the democratic process.

Stretton was, and is, an academic. At the moment he is Emeritus Professor of History and Visiting Research Fellow in Economics at the University of Adelaide. In a rise that would be an affront to today’s academic system, he was a professor of history by the time he was thirty. That was in 1954. Stretton was one of a large group of people who, in the three decades after World War II, reshaped and revitalised Australian culture and society. Some were well known, such as Nugget Coombs, Donald Horne, Nettie Palmer, A. A. Phillips and Judith Wright. Most were not-so-famous bureaucrats and technocrats who built the health and education systems, planned towns, and played key roles in the media and in government departments. Many of these people were academics or had strong links to academia.

I picked up my copy of *Ideas for Australian Cities* the other day and, as I flicked through it, I wondered what would happen if Stretton and his gang of postwar reformers rode into town now. These days such a group would almost certainly be derided as a ‘cultural elite’. Such elites, we are increasingly told, are not only out of touch with the mainstream, they act against the interests of the mainstream by spending too much time talking about minorities. They drink chardonnay and caffe
latte, and have no contact with or understanding of ordinary people who live in the outer suburbs and the bush. Forget the fact that there are plenty of places outside capital cities where you can get caffe latte, though our anti-elite commentators don’t seem to know that. And plenty of kids from battler families have worked hard to get a university education.

These ‘awkward’ details carry a greater significance: they help to explain the great cultural divide in Australia. The yawning gulf that everyone talks about isn’t between so-called elites and the mainstream, or even between the city and the bush. The big gap in Australian politics is between cleverly deployed political stereotypes and the realities of growing inequality and widespread dissatisfaction with economic ‘reform’. Elites, in other words, have been made targets of the same strategy of demonising the ‘other’ that has been used on asylum-seekers, Aboriginal land rights campaigners, ethnic youth gangs, ‘welfare mothers’, and so on.

On the face of it, the current demonisation of elites is as irrational as it is clever. It is irrational because it shows contempt for the views of the thousands of Australians who wrote letters to newspapers, signed petitions and started community groups to show their outrage at the Howard government’s policies on reconciliation, on the Wik 10-point plan, on saying sorry to the stolen generations, on the treatment of refugees and asylum-seekers, and so on. Were all those who came from far and wide to march for reconciliation and plant seas of hands in capital cities, or who protested against the war in Iraq, really just part of an ‘elite’? The attack is clever because it helps to mask the fact that those who attack elites are themselves part of an elite. How many ‘ordinary people’ have a radio show or a newspaper column? How many ‘ordinary people’ have the opportunity to vet the appointment of a government minister, as radio talkback host Alan Jones did in late 2001 before the instalment of a new police minister in New South Wales?
While media commentators love getting stuck into supposedly left-leaning, university-educated, inner-city elite groups and liberal-minded writers, they overlook the power wielded by other, far more influential numbers of elites such as corporate lobbies, right-wing think-tanks, leading talkback radio hosts and conservative columnists, many of whom have direct access to the highest echelons of the media, government and business.

The selective blindness of the present attack on elites is far from accidental. The Australian version of what amounts to a more or less systematic strategy has its roots in UK and US neoconservatism. Rhetoric against the social-reformist, supposedly unpatriotic liberal left was used in the UK in the late 1960s as part of the anti-immigrant agenda of the race-baiting politician Enoch Powell. It was further developed by US conservatives in the 1980s as a coded way of attacking civil rights and its supporters without appearing to be racist. When today’s conservative politicians attack the ‘new class’ or ‘cultural elite’ of liberal-left reformers, social democrats and public intellectuals, lower-middle- and working-class voters know precisely who they are referring to. These are the people who backed affirmative action, supported ‘political correctness’ and obsessed about minority rights while ordinary white folk were finding it more and more difficult to make ends meet. In today’s Australia these are the people who supported land rights, who oversaw the threat to your back yards during *Mabo* and *Wik*, who voted for Keating, and who now support the entry into the country of illegal aliens who may even be potential terrorists. The attack on elites as defenders of minority rights who do little more than perpetuate the dependence of minorities on outmoded welfare systems allows conservatives to portray themselves as the true anti-racists and as ‘common sense’ defenders of social justice.¹

The trouble is, healthy democracies need elites, especially those humanitarian elites that conservative commentators love
to disparage. A healthy democracy needs a heterogeneous class of civic-minded people willing to master detail, willing to preside over broader ethical questions, prepared to offer their specialised knowledge and expertise for the greater good, and willing to put the greater good ahead of self-interest. Government by the whims of a majority is no government at all. Such elites are guardians of the civil society that in the end everyone wants to inhabit, irrespective of political beliefs. In a healthy democracy, these humanitarian elites are never truly representative of the majority. Nor should they be, since they are protectors of those most likely to be disenfranchised, and whose role is to guard the rights of the voiceless. When such elites are attacked as voices out of season, something is wrong.

And if we need such elites, then we need universities to produce them. As I flicked through my copy of Ideas for Australian Cities I also wondered what would have happened to a young Stretton in the present academic system. The role of universities is increasingly to produce knowledge for private sector benefit. The debate about the curriculum as it relates to wider social purpose is more or less dead. Career paths have dried up with funding cuts. Would Stretton as a young academic in his early thirties in today’s world be a professor of history, or would he be a part-time casual tutor, or on a short-term or fractional contract, working casually or part-time outside the university as well, struggling to pay rent on a fairly dingy room in Newtown or Coburg or Toowong? The increasing orientation of universities towards the market tends to favour those forms of knowledge that are easily commodified at the expense of those that are concerned with less tangible things, such as civic purpose.

If, as both history and recent attacks on higher-education funding suggest, universities are engine rooms of social change, then how representative of the broader community are student and staff populations likely to be in an increasingly privatised, fee-paying university system? What kind of problems are they
likely to be interested in addressing? What kind of social agendas are they likely to set?

The attack on humanitarian elites is clever, too, because it’s a way of deflecting attention away from the social consequences of deeper structural change. Its context is a wider historical shift from valuing things that are public to valuing things that are private. Such people came to the fore as intellectuals who maintained the apparatus of postwar bipartisan consensus, where major political parties shared a broad commitment to ideals such as the provision of universal education and health services, and the maintenance of a ‘welfare state’, expedited via the principles of Keynesian economics. Since the mid 1970s, new-right conservatives following in the footsteps of Margaret Thatcher in Britain, Ronald Reagan in the United States and, belatedly, John Howard in Australia, have sought to sweep this consensus aside and to replace it with one based in ‘economic rationalist’ free-market economics, and a new social contract based on private interest and competitive individualism. Both they and sympathetic commentators have seen it as a point of honour to attack everything that came out of the postwar consensus, including the intelligentsia that administered it.

Attacks on Aboriginal land rights, multiculturalism, feminism, environmentalism, state-funded higher education, public broadcasting, Keynesian economics and other ‘new class’ causes aren’t merely a convenient, politically opportunistic staple for this new politics. Those making the attacks seek to shift blame onto the shoulders of their liberal predecessors to explain away growing social inequality as a lingering product of misguided attempts at social reform.

In an era of neoliberal free-market economics it’s no coincidence that the attack on elites centres precisely on those groups that were the custodians of postwar economic consensus. The market, now, is supposed to do their work, and it’s the market that the business lobbies and New Right think-tanks
revere above all else. This is why the present attack on elites most often takes the form of an attack on bastions of public culture such as universities, the ABC, and the last remnants of the privately owned liberal media—the Fairfax broadsheets. The establishment in the 1970s of New Right think-tanks, such as the influential Centre for Independent Studies, had the specific goal of creating a conservative-friendly alternative to universities. Demonising the postwar intelligentsia, too, helps to ensure that alternatives to generally unpopular (and often unsuccessful) neoliberal free-market reforms gain little support. Potential sources of opposition are increasingly denied not only their research base but also credibility in many popular, mass-audience public forums.

But the logic of the attack on elites goes deeper still. It centres on the question of national identity, and can be read as a response by conservatives to the problem of sovereignty and identity in a free-market globalised world. Talk of asylum-seekers and ‘border protection’, for example, provides politicians with a de facto way of passionately evoking the idea of national borders even as they sign them away in trade pacts that have the heaviest impact on precisely the same constituency who have suffered most from economic reform. When they demonise elites, politicians recognise that their prospects of electoral success by and large don’t lie with the supporters of such elites—the constituency who marched for reconciliation or against the war on Iraq—they lie instead with mining workers in central Queensland and struggling young families in the western suburbs of Sydney. What politicians are selling such voters is a multifaceted message about who the true Australians are. Public intellectuals don’t get much of a run.

Race is the key to today’s struggles over intellectual ascendency in the context of the shift from old consensus to new. Witness the 2003 debate over Keith Windschuttle’s The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, which argues that there were no significant massacres of Aborigines in Tasmania by white
settlers. *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, as James Boyce has convincingly showed, is incomplete in its rendering of Tasmanian history. More importantly, as the historian Henry Reynolds has argued, the book, with its fundamental denial of Aboriginal humanity and culture, was no less than an attempt to resuscitate the idea of *terra nullius*, the doctrine by which Australia prior to white settlement was considered as belonging to no one. At stake was the very nature of white national identity. At another level, the debate over Windschuttle’s book was a clash between two different consensus cultures, one public, one private. Almost all of Windschuttle’s detractors were academics such as Reynolds, Tony Birch, Robert Manne and Stuart Macintyre. His defenders were mostly commentators in the conservative press, especially *The Australian*, which played a leading role in promoting his book and which launched, via its news, features and opinion pages, a sustained attack on the motives and professionalism of its academic opponents.

The past two decades have been dominated by two interlinked intellectual turf wars, one over free-market economics—which conservatives have for all intents and purposes won—and one over race—which is still under way. Despite local differences, *The Australian*’s campaign was consistent with similar campaigns conducted overseas by bastions of New Right conservatism such as the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), a leading think-tank so prominent in US attacks on minority rights that one watchdog organisation dubbed it ‘the right’s race-desk’. Authors such as Charles Murray, Dinesh D’Souza and Robert Bork all worked as AEI scholars while writing books such as *The End of Racism: Principles for a Multiracial Society*, *The Bell Curve* and *Slouching Towards Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline* which, as well as advancing ideas about the innate cultural and/or biological inferiority of non-whites, have been at the forefront of US attacks on the ‘liberal’ supporters of social equality.
Australian commentators tend to be naive about the influence of US race politics on Australian debate. In the case of the Windschuttle debate the links aren’t merely ideological; they are also material. Tom Switzer, *The Australian*’s opinion editor, is an ex-AEI staff member. Windschuttle, too, has close links to the US New Right. Much of his writing has been published in the neoconservative journal the *New Criterion*, founded to counter a perceived ‘politically correct’ academic orthodoxy and push the cause of Western cultural supremacy. In those circles he is lauded as a masterful and devastating polemicist. The *New Criterion* has received millions of dollars of ongoing funding from US foundations noted for backing race-based right-wing agendas, and is famous for its attacks on Black Studies programs in US universities. Windschuttle’s articles for the *New Criterion* have included revisionist attacks on books such as John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* and on the work of intellectuals such as Edward Said and Clifford Geertz. Geoffrey Blainey’s enthusiastic review of *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* was also published there. Encounter Books, the US publisher of Windschuttle’s *The Killing of History*, is a coterie conservative press specialising in race-baiting texts—it publishes US writers of that persuasion such as David Horowitz and is noted for its links to the notoriously racist far-right organisation, the John Birch Society.

Journals such as *New Criterion* have played a leading intellectual role in an ongoing US neoconservative project that dates to the mid 1960s: to reassert the superiority of Western civilisation (characterising multiculturalism as cultural relativism in order to discredit it is a favourite journal theme). A central part of this project is to attack the legacy of 1950s and 1960s social liberation movements and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. More recently, the agenda has expanded to naturalising the Western ascendancy in the context of free-market globalisation, by repackaging neocolonial economic subjugation as genuinely civilising and therefore defensible. Both the
economic and race-based components of this project employ a social Darwinist framework, and neoconservative themes of Western supremacy now appear in neoliberal economic theory and—virulently—in foreign policy, especially in respect of aid and development. Windschuttle’s _The Fabrication of Aboriginal History_ is part of the same broad project (even if his place in the US neocon frame is minnowish and sycophantic), as are, in different ways, far more influential books such as Francis Fukuyama’s _The End of History and the Last Man_ or Samuel Huntington’s _The Clash of Civilizations_, both of which were produced with funding and patronage from the same foundations that fund _New Criterion_. That such books lack substance—Fukuyama’s and Huntington’s books, no less than Windschuttle’s, have been comprehensively debunked by well-qualified scholars—hardly matters. Their key ideas, interpreted in broad-brush form, have become the intellectual currency of our time.¹³

We’ve all paid a high material price for the new free-market consensus, even if the price tag is mostly hidden. Most people don’t realise what sort of shape the health care system is in until they get sick, or someone in their family must be hospitalised. Most people don’t realise how little protection is provided by the welfare safety net until a family member loses his or her job. Until they are involved with the law, most people don’t realise just how much the law now costs, or that cuts to legal aid mean that access to legal representation and remedy—the very definition of democracy—is out of the reach of most people. The attack on humanitarian elites has occurred at the same time as wealth and power are being distributed upwards. According to recent Australian Bureau of Statistics figures, Australia is now one of the most economically unequal countries in the Western world, with the richest 10 per cent of the population now controlling over half the wealth. We all pay a price, too, because of the damage that divisive wedge politics has done to less tangible things.
What is the cost to society as a whole when scapegoats are created, through the name-calling and demonisation of Aborigines, immigrants, and people seeking asylum in a safe country, in order to intentionally create mistrust and to paper over the cracks of growing economic and social inequality? What is the cost, also, to the very people whom the neoconservative elites claim to be protecting?

To look at a book such as Ideas for Australian Cities, or other public-spirited books of that era such as Donald Horne’s The Lucky Country, is to be struck by the boldness of their agendas. It’s a boldness partly born out of courageous optimism, partly out of desperation. The postwar elite grew out of a response to failure. Not only was it their business to rebuild and consolidate in the decades after the war, and to rethink institutions so as to insure against another depression, they also had to shake off a stultifying and hidebound culture.

Sound familiar? As has become obvious since the mid 1990s, this, too, is a time of economic uncertainty, and of a hidebound, increasingly stultifying climate of conservatism and entrenched social division.

What we need, in short, is a rejuvenation of Australia’s ideas culture. But this isn’t to say our present elites, either left or right, should be let off the hook. There can be no going back to the certainties of the postwar era over which the humanitarian cultural elite of liberal-left reformers, social democrats and public intellectuals were custodians. Increasingly, what remains of those elites represents no group but themselves, least of all of ethnic minorities or women. As a group they haven’t kept pace with the demographic changes that mass immigration, in particular, has brought to Australia. Since the days of Horne and Stretton, whose work always addressed a public broadly defined, literary–humanist elites have dominated the reformist side of debates over ‘ideas’, while addressing a narrow, white middle-class audience in a voice that itself too often smacks of nostalgia for simpler times.14
We need to question our present elites, including high-profile media figures, not because we’re saddled with a ‘cultural elite’ comprising ‘politically correct’ old lefties from the 1970s—as the accusation often goes—but because so many of the old lefties from the 1970s have become so conservative, even if they and their editors don’t realise it. Most established social and political pundits have completely run out of ideas, but many still pose as mavericks in the media, flaunting faded social-democrat credentials even as they’ve embraced and often campaign hard for neoliberal economics or punitive social policies. They’ve been joined by a whole bunch of neoconservatives who, Imre Salusinszky-style, seem to be able to do little but set up and knock down straw men, so that public life is mostly narrated by out-of-touch representatives of these two groups in a tag-team spectacle that is little more than predictable diversion. So, ex-Whitlamite Paul Kelly rabbits on about the free market and the evils of anti-globalisation protesters. Or ex-feminist Bettina Arndt tells us all about how hard things are for men because of the things women do to them. Or Greg Sheridan waxes indignant about anti-Americanism. Nearby, often in the same pages, a phalanx of schlock-troop commentators—Piers Akerman, Michael Barnard, Andrew Bolt, Miranda Devine, Michael Duffy, Christopher Pearson—make it their stock in trade to pick fights with, and try to pick off, the remnants of the old cultural elite as personified by figures such as Robert Manne and Phillip Adams. To compare this ‘intelligentsia’ with the postwar intelligentsia is to be struck by how little substance this group has and how much space they now take up, as well as their utter inability to set an original agenda that doesn’t rely on the pieties of 1980s economic rationalism or the destructive certainties of 1980s neoconservatism.

We need to question, too, our more clearly socially progressive elites. What remains of the old literary–humanist elite has to an extent understood that to maintain credibility it
needs to show genuine inclusiveness. Apparently shocked by recent political developments, its aestheticised, \textit{belle-lettrist} understanding of the world has begun to give way to a properly political understanding of what the new conservatism and its race politics entail. It remains, though, a largely white clique wedded to high-culture, Eurocentric models of critique; it often displays the reflexes of a patrician liberalism that bases its authority in ‘speaking for’ the other. This incarnation of the Left nevertheless holds the high public ground in a climate where the academic postmodernist faction—the cultural left—has failed to produce high-profile public figures who play a sustained role in debate—the lead in recent debates on asylum-seekers and Aboriginal history has largely been taken by traditional public intellectuals and public-spirited lawyers—and has failed to have any major institutional impact beyond the academy. One salutary effect of the Windschuttle debate has been to foster a recognition on the part of the liberal centre-left and the cultural left that they share powerful enemies.

Almost no important new ideas have entered Australian public debate for more than a decade, and the need for them is more important than ever. We need new ideas about how to base a democracy in diversity, without race-based scapegoating. New ideas about how to manage economies that both generate and redistribute wealth. Economic models that can account for social costs. New ideas about the relationship between individuals and society, and the role of democratic institutions. New ideas about how to manage the relationship between public and private. Ways of distinguishing between different types of globalisation, between the present corporate model and other, more useful models.

Avenues for dissent are beyond the reach of ‘ordinary people’ at the same time as, for many, economic power is drifting away. Meanwhile, that group of thinkers and planners that has historically been the safeguard of all these things has had its institutional power eroded and is losing its research base.
Looking at books such as *Ideas for Australian Cities*, one wonders where these new ideas will come from in an era of increasingly privatised knowledge. Who will sponsor them? Where is the public culture in which they will thrive?

Some of the best new ideas are being developed far from the power centres of Australian debate by a generation of thinkers who largely lack institutional backing or access to mainstream forums, and who wonder if they will ever have influence. Non-government organisations (NGOs), for example, have emerged as a powerful and influential ‘alternative’ to neoliberal think-tanks—so much so that they’ve found themselves under consistent attack by the think-tanks, and the government has appointed NGOs’ fiercest opponent, the Institute for Public Affairs, to run an inquiry into their activities. Other major forums include festivals and public events, the Internet (Australian Policy Online, Indymedia, the Drawing Board), books (the massive success of books such as Naomi Klein’s *No Logo* and Mike Moore’s *Stupid White Men* shows, if nothing else, that there is a hungry audience for ideas that cut across the grain of our received intellectual orthodoxies), journals and magazines (in Australia, *Overland, Spinach 7, Arena*) and, still, universities. Small nonprofit organisations, including some progressive think-tanks, are also at the forefront of new ideas. These are all forums, not uncoincidentally, that remain largely divorced from mainstream ‘debate’ and its filters. Currently the ideas being produced in such circles lead a secret life, and are routinely dismissed precisely because they aren’t compatible with the dominant intellectual illusions of the age—because editors, publishers, producers, politicians, commentators and other opinion leaders haven’t understood the nature of the gap between official opinion, in the age of free-market globalisation, and the concerns and ideas of their audiences. Yet these are ideas whose transmission into the mainstream many of us, both ‘ordinary people’ and intellectuals’, await with eagerness.
NOTES

1 For an analysis of the development of anti-‘new class’ rhetoric in the context of the rise of the new right and ‘new racism’ in the USA and the UK, see Ansell, New Right, New Racism, pp. 63–4 and 137–41. For an analysis of the ongoing legacy of Enoch Powell, see Smith, New Right Discourse.
2 See Boyce, ‘Fantasy Island’, pp. 17–78.
4 See Manne, ‘Introduction’, pp. 1–13, for an overview of debate on that point.
5 Other key struggles have been over things such as women’s rights and industrial relations, but none has made it onto the front pages or into the vernacular in the same way as the struggles over economics and race.
6 Toler, ‘The Right’s “Race Desk”’.
8 Kimball, ‘Who was David Stove?.
11 Blainey, ‘Native Fiction’.
12 Alterman, ‘The “Right” Books’.
13 A close examination of the topics canvassed above will appear in my ‘Dark Harvest: Globalisation and the New Racism’ (forthcoming).
14 For further examination of the recent activities of Australia’s literary–humanist intellectual coteries, see Davis, ‘Assaying the Essay’, pp. 3–10.
15 Manne has been a leader here. Witness the inclusion of Aboriginal voices in his Whitewash, compared to the lack of such voices in the 1998 collection also published by Black. Inc/Bookman, Two Nations: The Causes and Effects of the Rise of the One Nation Party in Australia, to which he contributed the Foreword.
16 See Manne, In Denial.
17 Which is a polite way of saying this group still has some way to go. Australian Quarterly Essay (which is also published by Black. Inc/Bookman), for example, has been notable for the lack of women in its pages, and has produced two issues where whites talk about Aborigines, but none by an Aborigine.
18 I don’t mean to discount, here, the contributions of thinkers such as Tony Birch, Ghassan Hage, Mary Kalantzis, Marcia Langton, Suvendrini Perera or Mary Zournazi, to name several who have made strong contributions to these recent debates, but no such figure is known outside their immediate circle in the way that figures such as Reynolds, Manne or Gerard Henderson are. There remain, I think, problems with the way the cultural left has constructed itself as an oppositional formation. These aren’t merely to do with the hostility of the mainstream (liberal) media to new (post-liberal) forms of critique, or to do with the disenfranchisement of intellectuals generally, but also derive from a complex range of internal factors that deserve an essay on their own.