

2013 Don Dunstan Oration
Monday 9 December 2013
5:00pm – 7:00pm
Riverbank Rooms, Adelaide Convention Centre
North Terrace, Adelaide
Annabel Crabb

Don Dunstan...

It's incredibly annoying to me that the one politician more qualified than any other in Australia's history to appear on Kitchen Cabinet died thirteen years before we started making the programme.

“This is not meant to be the kitchen equivalent of *The Joy Of Sex*, deservedly a best seller,” begins the introduction to Don Dunstan's cookbook, first published in 1976. “It is not even a sequel to a book which had a brief vogue some years ago called *A Seducer's Cook Book*, and will not contain even that now frequent chapter in books about food giving historical information on reputed aphrodisiacs and love-philtres. But I do believe that if you can't take your love to bed, at least you can be close by providing the sensuous pleasure of the sharing of good food; and if you can (take your love to bed that is) then good food is an added delight.”

Don Dunstan had been Premier of South Australia for five years when he wrote those words, and published that book. Reading the introduction now, you just have to cackle at the sheer effrontery of the man. Imagine a serving Premier writing a book at all, let alone a cook book, let alone a cook book filled with all sorts of foreign muck, like Gado Gado, Rendang and Hussein Kebabs. And imagine kicking the whole endeavour off in such a casually risqué style.

Truly, I could happily occupy this entire hour by reading out bits and pieces from the cook book, which tells us so much more than how to preserve a goose, or cook veal kidneys in claret, or how to smear a chicken with a paste of spices, butter and monosodium glutamate and barbecue it in a way that challenges the famous recipe of an even-then-well-known American colonel. (When Dunstan republished the book in 1998, he did have the good grace to be embarrassed about the monosodium glutamate, which means the MSG chook recipe joins pink shorts on the modest list of Dunstan decisions to have been regretted mildly by their author in retrospect.)

The Dunstan cookbook is actually a fascinating historical document, as so many cookbooks are, and you can sense the author's impatience and fierce desire for modernity on every page.

Cripes, he was tough on Australian cuisine. Cop this:

“Unfortunately, in most restaurants with some pretension to better cooking, it is now possible to forecast the menu almost exactly: “French onion soup (which isn't) and soup of the day; seafood cocktail, oysters, maybe an avocado; fried whiting with tartare sauce and whiting meuniere (which isn't); crumbed prawns, lobster thermidor, armoricaine (which isn't), or Newburg; chicken chasseur, duckling in a basket, a l'orange (which isn't); maybe some pasta (spaghetti Bolognese, lasagna); wiener schnitzel, steaks in various cuts, Chateaubriand, tournedos Henri Quatre (which isn't); strawberries and cream, sometimes the strawberries marinated and called Romanoff, gelati, some crepes.... It has developed a sad sameness which is absurd, given the tremendous food resources that we have.”



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His contempt for the Australian interpretation of curry is utterly withering: “What seems to be accepted kitchen practice in this country is that a curry is a weak stew of meat, sometimes with vegetables and even fruit added to it, and flavoured with two teaspoons of a commercial curry powder. Having at an early age been fed with delicious goat and chicken curries at the table of my father’s great friend Battan Singh, I carefully avoid these Australian insults to a great cuisine. A little later in this chapter I shall describe curry making as it should be done.”

I promise this isn’t just going to go on and on, but I also can’t resist the moment when he turns his gimlet eye on the ladies preparing the function buffets with which one supposes the Dunstan diary was quite liberally plagued.

“Whereas once the ladies of the community service organisations provided joyless cold meats and un-dressed salads (do you remember those great piles of shredded lettuce?) they at least provided some superb cakes. Cake-making, I find – and I speak from twenty years’ experience in which attendance at community functions is an occupational requirement – has declined. The cold meats have been replaced by the “Mornay” (and here Dunstan employs the most contemptuous pair of inverted commas I have ever flinchingly registered as a reader) Under this guise are served various strange and often quite incongruous mixtures of cooked or tinned meats and vegetables, all smothered in a white sauce flavoured sometimes with cheese.”

We know that Dunstan was ahead of his time in many respects. But to be calling out mornay in 1976 – that’s seriously impressive.

Reading this stuff makes me break into a cold sweat at the thought of serving Don Dunstan anything at all; perhaps it’s best



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that he was never subjected to any of my cakes on Kitchen Cabinet.

I did have the privilege of meeting him once, not long before he died. It was on the occasion of the book's republication, and my good friend Samantha Maiden, who then was the South Australian state political reporter for Channel Ten, organised for both of us to go to Dunstan's home in Norwood to do a story about the book. He was very, very frail; painfully thin, and up only for about an hour a day by that stage.

But his intellectual vigilance even in that weakened state was unmistakable. Creakingly, he gave us a tour of his garden; it was a dense and fragrant kitchen garden full of herbs and kaffir limes. At one point, he crouched down to break off a sprig. For an endless pulse of time, it seemed he would not be able to recover a standing position. I remember freezing. He was light enough that I could have scooped him up, but the insult would have been incalculable. So I hovered miserably, rehearsing headlines like "Cadet Reporter Inadvertently Kills Political Legend". Soon enough, we did get him back on his feet with no harm done; he held out the sprig of herb, and said of it, scornfully: "People call this stuff Vietnamese mint. But it's ridiculous, because it's not Vietnamese, and it's NOT MINT!" I thought I noticed the herb wilting as he denounced it.

I think food is an excellent medium through which to analyse politicians, and its symbolism is pungent. Why did Julia Gillard's empty fruitbowl become such a vexed national receptacle? Because it evoked for us, unavoidably and in a snapshot, the unforgivable double jeopardy that awaits women who go into politics; for too many, childlessness is the price of admission, but when they succeed, their childlessness devalues

them, because they do not “understand” how families work. It’s one of the crueller attributes of public life in this country.

When Joe Hockey cooked me lunch, there could not have been a more pleasantly ham-fisted domestic technician. He could not locate the knife drawer. The oven in his kitchen, which was more than five years old, still had the plastic on it. When I handed him an Iceberg lettuce and suggested he compose a salad, I think I saw his eyeballs flash for help.

And yet, no-one doubts his capacity to be Treasurer as a result, or wonders whether he understands Australian families.

When Barnaby Joyce cooked me dinner, he made beef in a red wine sauce. He ate his first, in about three minutes flat, and without drawing a breath swapped my plate for his and ate mine too. I found that charming, and it told me a lot about him. I don’t think I’ve ever had so much feedback from an episode as I had from the Kevin Rudd one this year, and most of it was about the fact that he declined to eat the pavlova I took him, though I must say I harbor no resentment on that front.

Julie Bishop once obsessively baked dozens and dozens of cupcakes in order to beat her Brownie colleagues to the cupcake badge. Bronwyn Bishop still has a 1970s copy of the Australian Gourmet magazine in which she is featured, a celebrated and gypsophila-swathed hostess, serving her guests ham rolls in aspic. What Dunstan would have thought of that, I do not know, although I certainly have some ideas about what they might have thought of each other.

Don Dunstan’s fierce adventurism in food tells us an extraordinary amount about him; about his restlessness with the status quo, and about his fearlessness of the unknown. He also understood the importance of food, and home, and respect, and

belonging, to the strength of a society like Australia's, built as it is out of odds and ends from countries all over the world. He was ahead of his time in spotting the importance of all this, just as he was ahead of his time in intuiting the significance of town planning to the growth of a healthy society, and the central usefulness of the arts in that endeavour.

Dunstan was, in office, and continues to be now, a divisive figure in many ways. For every South Australian who thrills to his vision, there is another who recalls that era as one of unwelcome or hyper-accelerated change, who cannot forgive him his economic legacy or who cannot agree with his priorities.

What fascinates me, though, is the sheer muscularity of his leadership style; it is reflected perfectly in his peppery approach to cuisine. The effrontery, as I put it earlier. The sheer pigheaded conviction that this is the way to go – and fast – and the exhilaration that comes with trying to convince others to follow, while genuinely not caring that there are those who disagree.

It is only in reading the accounts of politics in the 1970s that one can truly appreciate how different things are now. Here's Geoff Kitney's recollection – recently published in Troy Bramston's collection of writings about the Whitlam era – of Whitlam's visit to Perth in 1974. Whitlam spoke at a rally of farmers who were incredibly cross about his decision to end the subsidy of superphosphate.

Here's what he said to the crowd:

‘Never before have so many young farmers (been able to afford) to down tools, take a whole day off and come to town while the rest of us have to work. Subsidised to take the day off. Bludging here.



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Bludging! There will be a very great number of people who will see how vicious and violent are people when something to which they are no longer entitled to have is taken from them.’

Kitney records that a hail of tomatoes, fruit, eggs and soft drink quickly descended upon the Prime Minister; Kitney himself, then a correspondent for the Perth News, later typed his story with shaking fingers, chastened by how close to death he had come at the centre of the melee.

It is an old adage among number-crunchers in the Australian Labor Party that when you are canvassing for votes, the only people you should absolutely believe are those who declare they will be voting for your opponent.

And similarly, the most economical way of finding out exactly what a political leader’s limits are – aside from having them cook you some kind of casserole, obviously – is to put them in front of a hostile audience.

Great leaders are the leaders who don’t soften their words just because they’re talking to an audience of opponents. Great leaders are the ones who double down; who believe so strongly in what they are proposing that they are prepared to wager their own political welfare on being able to convince more than half of the population that they are right.

Bob Hawke and Paul Keating did it in the 1980s and 1990s, when they reformed Australia’s economy in ways that were immeasurably upsetting for their own blue-collar voters. Substantial elements of those reforms, by the way, were opposed very passionately by Don Dunstan.

And John Howard did the same in 1996, when he took on sections of his own constituency to reform gun laws after the Port Arthur massacre. He did it again in 1998 when campaigning to introduce the GST, a decision so courageous – in the Sir Humphrey sense – that half of his own colleagues were completely horrified by it.

“The preparedness to offend” does not sound, on the face of it, like much of a qualification for politics. But actually, it’s incredibly important. Large ideas, ambitious ideas, will always offend somebody. And the greatest compliment a leader can pay to democracy is to use it as it was intended; as a competition of ideas, in which every participant is welcome, and everyone has an equal vote, and of the ideas available, some will win and some will lose.

What worries me often about contemporary politics is that the giving of offence is considered unpardonable, or worse – it’s considered politically foolish.

The more sophisticated voter research technologies become; the easier and cheaper it gets to check, in real time, what voters think of even minor policy initiatives. And once politicians start to scratch the itch of contemporaneous assessment, the itchier it becomes. Of course it’s tempting to find out how an idea is likely to be received before one actually publicly endorses it. Humans cleave naturally toward certainty, and toward safety, and political leaders are human. But the greatest among them are not great because they possess an uncanny prescience as to where the bulk of the population are on a particular issue; they are great because they see where a population could end up, if properly convinced and inspired.

Fifteen years ago, I worked a couple of doors down North Terrace in The Advertiser’s subterranean Parliament House lair;



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my job was to cover the Legislative Council, and when Parliament was sitting I clocked on at eight thirty and worked until whenever both chambers rose; sometimes, it would be 3am. Not that you could actually get anything into the next day's paper after 10pm or so; I just stuck around night after night because I didn't want to miss anything, and at any rate, any building with a subsidized bar tends to get more and more interesting, the later it gets; that's another iron-clad law of human behaviour.

Things are entirely different now, of course. It's never too late in the night to publish; not any more, and the digital revolution has rendered deadlines more or less redundant. I have about 120,000 followers on Twitter; about two thirds of the circulation of my old paper The Advertiser; tweeting something that's just happened doesn't have quite the punch of putting it in the paper, but it's not out of the ball park, and that's pretty weird, isn't it?

What has happened to my industry in the last ten years has been nothing short of an industrial revolution. The established media's monopoly over both the collection and the dissemination of information has been blown apart. It's exciting, and also terrifying, and the knock-on effects for politics and public policy have been profound.

How do you make the case for policy reform in an atmosphere where everyone is shouting to be heard, and where attention spans resemble the life span of a gnat? How do we encourage our politicians to be fearless and courageous, when every fandangle of this gadget-strewn landscape – every Facebook “Like” button or inevitable reader poll at the end of every online news story – is geared toward the seeking of instant approval?

Is it any wonder that contemporary political leaders shrink from the prospect of offending anyone? For them, the blowback is



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immediate. It's not like it was for Dunstan, who in the daytime could legislate to change shopping hours, or decriminalise homosexuality, or abolish the death penalty, and then come home for a deliciously undisturbed evening of goose-pickling.

I wonder what Don Dunstan would have made of this new landscape. The most obvious guess would be that he would have abhorred it with the same visceral loathing he harboured for dreadful modern shortcuts like curry powder, or béchamel sauce.

But then again, perhaps he mightn't have. Dunstan's fiercest orientation was toward democracy and egalitarianism, with all the human messiness that both those concepts entail; in proper democracy, everyone gets a vote; even the stupid, even the malevolent, even the people with whom one most violently disagrees. And if this modern media landscape isn't the ultimate expression of everyone getting a say, then I don't know what is.

The truth is that democracy is a long, inexorable story about decentralisation of control over information, and we are still far from the end.

When Edmund Burke made his famous 1774 "Speech To The Electors Of Bristol", he cemented the concept of representative democracy; the idea that people are better off when their representatives do as they judge best, and not always as their constituents would have them do.

This continues to be a pretty central issue, I reckon. Burke didn't have Newspoll, but if he had, it would probably have sobered him up a little with these high-faluting ideas about going ahead and doing whatever you think best as a politician, and damn what the electorate thinks.

At that time, the Burkean proposition was an easier one to execute. Voters had no idea what their representatives were doing most of the time.

And why? Well, for a start, it was a criminal offence back then even to report parliamentary speeches or goings-on. William Pulteney, leader of the Tory Opposition, had explained these arrangements thus: “To print or publish the speeches of gentlemen in this House, even though they were not misrepresented, looks very much like making them accountable without doors for what they say within”.

Parliamentary sketchwriters got around this difficulty with a devious innovation. When the young Samuel Johnson was eking out a living writing for *The Gentleman’s Magazine* in the late 1730s, he had a spy relay to him the outline of the debates in the House of Commons. Changing the names but keeping the characters clearly recognizable, he wrote them up in his column: “Debates In The Senate Of Lilliput.” The magazine stacked on circulation as readers cottoned on, and gathered around this breach of the walls cocooning the democratic process.

The American founding fathers operated on the assumption that politicians and politicians alone would decide what would be reported to the American people. James Madison believed there should be no congressional record.

President John Quincy Adams thought “hired reporters (he compared them to spies) had no right to impinge on the right of the leaders to decide what and when to report to the citizenry.”

In these days of information overload, it’s easy to forget that it’s not very long ago that we were allowed very little information at all about what our political leaders were up to.

And it's not just politics where information has a history of imprisonment.

Take William Tyndale, the famous 16th century scholar who translated the Bible into English, and was, for his trouble, run out of town by the church. Six thousand copies of his English Bible were smuggled into Britain – London's Archbishop Cuthbert Tunstall bought them all, and burned them on the steps of St Paul's Cathedral. The People's Bible had no place there.

Nothing got better for Tyndale from then on, incidentally. They were fearful literalists in the Roman Catholic Church back then, and in 1536 Tyndale was tried for heresy, condemned, strangled, then impaled, and then his body was burned on the stake.

Not unlike what happens to public servants if you are sufficiently incautious as to say something remotely useful to the likes of me.

What I am trying to get across here is that Western democracy is an evolution of information control. At the beginning, politicians controlled everything. Then the media arrived as agents for the general population. Now, communications technology is allowing motivated individuals to do the job themselves.

I sort of suspect that Don Dunstan might have approved of all this liberalization. For all the mess and fuss occasioned by the relentless democratisation of the media over the centuries, from the King James Bible to widespread literacy to newspapers to radio to television to the vast crusading arrival of the internet, the pattern is clear – more information and consequently more power to the people. I think this is an overall trend of which Dunstan would essentially have approved.

Also, just have a look at the bloke. This is a man who understood the relentless primacy of the fleeting image. The importance of symbolism. On the 19th of January 1976, half of Adelaide was in turmoil over the prediction of a Jehovah's Witness clairvoyant and housepainter that the city would be struck by a tsunami. The killer wave would be sent by a vengeful God appalled by the Dunstan Government's surrender to licentiousness, or so the chap foretold. Dunstan went and stood on the foreshore, daring the wave to take him out. It didn't, and everyone went to the pub, and the image of him on that day is immortal.

Please don't tell me that this man – the same man who wore the pink shorts, who in 1974 headed off a run on the Hindmarsh Building Society by appearing on the scene and reassuring account holders personally by means of a megaphone – don't tell me that man wouldn't, in this day and age, be a social media megastar.

Well you can see where this leaves us – with a lot of adjustment to do. But where does it leave you?

Well, I think you people are the last frontier of information control.

The federal public service, it was [reported last month](#), employs some 1,600 media and communications, marketing and public affairs staff, at an annual cost of \$150 million.

And yet, for most journalists, getting to the people who make and implement policy is still incredibly difficult.

Even a vast team of media officers is no guarantee, in any department, that you will ever get to the people who know what they are talking about. In 2001, at the height of the "children overboard" controversy, the Defence Department had about 200 media staff, not one of whom was allowed to answer calls from

journalists without an express approval from Peter Reith's office.

To this day, the quickest way to freak out a public servant is still to ring him or her on a direct line. Those who don't immediately hang up in terror will generally make it clear straight away that they are not authorised to speak, and that a special place in public sector hell would await them should they ever appear in some sort of publication.

In a world marked by the democratisation of information, the barriers between public servants and journalists remain stubbornly inviolate.

Now, I am guessing that a large proportion of you are public servants, and I want you to know first of all that I love you people. You are marvelous, and you know an inordinate amount about many, many interesting and useful things. And yet, I am not allowed to talk to you.

When I ring you up, you do everything but blast a rape whistle down the phone. Seriously, when that happens it's like I'm trying to flush out Anne Frank. True story – once cold called a public servant, whom I'll call Anne Frank. Hello, my name is Annabel Crabb and I'm a journalist from the Sydney Morning Herald. Is that Anne Frank?

“Yes, but that is completely off the record. And also I can't speak to you. And that's off the record too.”

About two years ago, I found myself on a plane from Canberra to Sydney, when I noticed that the chap across the aisle (is was a Dash-8 aircraft, so when I say he was across the aisle what I really mean is that I was pretty much sitting in his lap) was reading a departmental report that I had been trying to get hold of for about five days. It wasn't a secret report, and I wasn't trying anything on by seeking it out; it was about a Government



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programme I thought was entirely worthy, and I was trying to write a column about what a terrifically good idea it was. But do you think I could get anyone to ring me back?

As you can imagine, when I spotted the report in the paws of my next door neighbour, my natural sense of politeness and discretion was pitched directly and incontrovertibly against my other most powerful instinct – nosiness and acquisitiveness.

In the end, I lunged over and forced the poor man to answer my questions for the entire 50-minute flight. “Are you the lady from the ABC who’s been calling?” he asked when I struck. And we had a perfectly productive conversation, which resulted in me writing a much better informed piece than I would otherwise have done, and once I had signed my name in blood pledging that I would never mention his name or conform that we had ever spoken, he was okay too.

Hilariously enough, as a journalist the thing people are always impressed by is the interviews you do with politicians. But that’s not hard at all. It wasn’t even all that hard in the days before I started turning up with a cake.

Interview the prime minister? That’s one thing. Interview anyone who is SES Band 1? That’s seriously hard. That’s having-a-beer-with-JD-Salinger hard.

Public servants who pseudonymously inhabit social media platforms, or whom one meets socially, will point out that journalists often get things wrong. I wouldn't dispute this for a second. We get things wrong all the time. But often, we are actively prohibited from asking simple questions of the people who might help us get things right.

In Australia, the public service is the last great bastion of information protectionism. And this is not a question of

journalistic inconvenience or embarrassment: why should a vast wealth of knowledge and expertise, amassed at considerable public expense, not be freely available wherever necessary to improve the standard of public debate?

When I had the opportunity one day last year, I asked a very senior public service executive why it was that his staff were so rigorously protected from journalists. He told me, very frankly, that it was not worth a public servant's hide to brief or interact with us. The chances of a political controversy - in the event that a public servant's faithful briefing did not square with the Government's spin on any given issue - were just too great, he said.

This is a pretty depressing state of affairs. The idea that bureaucrats would rather allow misleading information to appear uncorrected than get themselves into trouble with the Government of the day doesn't sound to me like an especially faithful rendering of the "frank and fearless" standard.

Institutions are profoundly vulnerable to the changes in mass communications that have taken place in the last decade. Governments, churches, media organisations, retail institutions – all of them have sustained massive damage from these disruptive technologies.

In the Babel of noise created by the new digital environment, the quality that has become prized above all else is reliability. Credibility. Experience. A long attention span. How extraordinarily fortunate it is that the public sector – the ultimate expression of our collective wealth and joint endeavour – should now offer just such a set of qualifications.

One of Don Dunstan's greatest virtues, I believe, was that he saw connections where others didn't. He saw that the way people eat together, the way they prepare food for each other

and extend hospitality to strangers, was a significant part of the way societies build and glue themselves together.

If there is a legacy of his that translates to this strange and anarchic public policy environment in which we now find ourselves, I hope that it will be this; that we recognise and properly value the jewel that is the public sector. That we constantly think of ways to make that knowledge more accessible to the people who ultimately own it, even when that process is difficult or scary. That – like Don Dunstan – we are constantly impatient for change, and are never too polite to demand it.

Thank you.

((most depressing words I ever read... Bruce Hawker's book)))

Courage to offend.

Problem is, the modern media environment gears them to defend.

They defend using woolly language.

Cursed by the “soft bigotry of low expectations...xxx of lowered expectations. Pernicious and dreadful, paralyzing influence. We put them on TV and don’t expect them to say anything. They respond by extruding the luncheon meat language that drives us so mad.

This exacerbates the central quest inside this mad whirling system – the search for certainty. For credibility. For reliability, consistency, authority.

Public sector.

How to give greater access to this expertise and certainty?

Vast repository of research, to whi

Broaden your perspectives. Administer as if our lives depended on it.

Snowden etc

Every time I hear a politician say something that offends me, I feel like kissing the ground. It means that when they say something that pleases me, they probably actually mean it.

Whitlam: