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Fake News, Federalism and the Love Media

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I have long been a sceptic about the United Nations and the imposition of international treaties on Australia's domestic political debate. But who knew we had a United Nations sitting in our own Senate! It explains a lot.

I have flown across the full breadth of this country to speak to a group of constitutional conservatives but, when I ducked into the bar downstairs, I noted it was called Fenians!

Then I bumped into a friend who happens to be the Chancellor of the University of South Australia and is from Northern Ireland – and he is an Orangeman!

You have to love Australia. These divisions do not bother us. Forget tearing down statues – in this country, the constitutional conservatives and Fenians, the Republicans and Orangemen, can bond over a beer.

This is the first time I have spoken in Perth. Someone once said follow the money . . . so from most of the Federation, if you follow the money, you end up here. I shall return to those issues in a moment.

But first I want to start by doing something a little unusual for me; I want to recognise our Indigenous people and the land we share with them. This land unites us as Australians; we love this great southern land.

Indigenous people were here first and their descendants are among us today. I cherish that. It makes us all richer – Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

And to share the spoils of this nation, to govern its people fairly, and balance the competing needs of the founding colonies we were given, by the hard toil and insight of the likes of Samuel Griffith, a masterful Constitution.

This continent, these peoples, under this Constitution and all that we have become; this is what we are. As former prime minister, Julia Gillard, once famously put it – “we are us.”

To be frank, when she said that, I felt like aping Monty Python’s Brian and piping up from down the back – “I’m not!”

We are a collection of people sharing a continent and we do it under the Constitution. We have inherited British traditions and adopted indigenous words and ways, as well as those of many other cultures. We have done it well. Not perfectly by any stretch. But we have shared this land well.

The Constitution of Australia was, in a way, the amalgamation of six peoples – six colonies were six different groups – and with each colony treating Aborigines differently, Indigenous people were left in a kind of no man’s land.

So allow me just to spruik for a moment the model we have before us for Indigenous recognition.

This was conceived and designed by constitutional conservatives and it was refined and embraced by Noel Pearson and other Indigenous leaders. It might be embraced by this room because it avoids any additional preamble which could be open to over-interpretation, and it deliberately rejects the restricted bill of rights implications of a racial non-discrimination clause.

It protects the Constitution. It is the conservative option.

When I was first convinced of this model after extensive reading, meetings and debate with the proponents about two years ago, I thought it was all too late ever to succeed. The fact that Pearson and others have been able to build consensus around this model is extraordinary, especially when they had some hard-line activists to placate who certainly wanted a racial non-discrimination clause (a central part of the recommendations to the Government from the expert panel) and also were pushing for a treaty.

Given that the Commonwealth Parliament has constitutional power over Indigenous affairs, including native title, it is inconceivable that we would not have an Indigenous advisory body of some kind.

We have one now. It is *ad hoc*, appointed by the Government, not legislated and could be disbanded tomorrow. But we have one.

All this constitutional proposal would do is mandate such a body to provide non-binding advice to the Government on matters related to Indigenous affairs. Its membership, the manner of its selection, its functions and funding would all be the prerogative of the Parliament – not the Constitution.

Please think about this option, read the book, *The Forgotten People*, edited by Damien Freeman and Shireen Morris, that teases out these issues. (Full disclosure: I wrote the opening chapter.)

The Uluru Statement from the Heart embracing this approach is really an historic opportunity – the breadth and depth of Indigenous leadership that has worked hard, given ground and compromised around this approach is remarkable. They have gone the extra yard – it really is incumbent upon the broader community now, especially constitutional conservatives – to give it serious consideration.

Mandating an Indigenous advisory body strikes me as

more minimalist on constitutional reform than anyone could have thought possible – yet by guaranteeing a voice for Indigenous Australians it is more useful and meaningful than we could have expected.

Anyway, we have plenty of time to keep discussing and considering these issues because it does not strike me that our political leaders have sufficient political capital at the moment to make any advances. They are too busy trying to comply with the Constitution to reform it.

As a refugee from South Australia who now resides in Sydney, I still have a special place in my heart for my birthplace, that free-settler State turned struggling mendicant. And that is why I should like to acknowledge another group as I stand here in Perth – I would like to thank the generous taxpayers of Western Australia.

Without you, my friends and extended family would not be fed, and my beloved Adelaide Crows would not have a packed stadium of cheering and solvent fans at their home games. They will play here tomorrow. As they run out on the ground at Subiaco – the last AFL game at that ground – just remember that through the wonders of horizontal fiscal equalisation, Western Australians are not only fielding their own team but helping to fund the opposition.

When I was a young reporter in South Australia I used to repeat the glib line, borrowed from the late John Bannon, that horizontal fiscal equalisation was the glue that held the Federation together.

I am older and more world-weary now. And I know that the reason it is called horizontal fiscal equalisation is because some States – such as my old home State – can recline lazily in a horizontal position and rely on the hard-work and hard-won tax dollars of the other States. Horizontal fiscal reclining

While South Australia has spent up big on an unnecessary

desalination plant, a half a billion dollar oval upgrade and the world's most expensive hospital, it has also chased a virtue-signalling, climate gesture goal of 50 percent renewable energy . . . shutting down or forcing out coal and gas generation. And to survive next summer the Weatherill Labor Government is literally sticky-taping a solution together, shipping in diesel generators here, rushing to build the world's largest battery there, and running advertising campaigns urging people not to use too much electricity – all this at a cost of \$550 million, and some of that money, some of that glue holding an electricity system together, will come from Western Australia and other States – the cash that holds the Federation, and indolent States, together.

Horizontal fiscal equalisation means efficient States pay for the indulgences of a State like South Australia. In its current form it is like a national, institutional version of the personal welfare traps that can encourage dependence and reward indolence in our social welfare system. It needs reform.

But why would people whinge about federation and call for reform when it is working so well? Let us have a look at this well-oiled machine of federation.

The City of Fremantle, just down the road, and the Yarra and Darebin councils in Victoria, have railed against Australia Day. They have shifted it. They do not like it.

It is our national day and it is under attack from local government. These people seriously cannot organise an efficient means to dispose of our rubbish – my council gives us four separate bins – yet they deign to lecture us on our national day.

Everyone is entitled to their opinion but when it comes to Australia Day, surely the only question for local government is, will we open the library? Will the rubbish be collected on 26 January or will we catch up the next day?

In Sydney we saw the Marrickville Council adopt a motion – since overturned thankfully – to “boycott all goods made in

Israel and any sporting, institutional academic, government or institutional cultural exchanges.”

Hang on, speaking of constitutional recognition, local government is not even recognised in the Constitution, so how did it get the power to meddle in foreign affairs? Before checking the Constitution – I know some of you will be flicking through section 51 in your minds now – clearly councils do not have responsibility for foreign relations or external affairs.

That power must rest with the States. I know this because on 22 June 2017, the Parliament of South Australia condemned settlement building by Israel and demanded that Australia “recognise the State of Palestine.”

Here is a State deep in debt, with the highest unemployment rate in the land that cannot keep its lights on – I am talking about South Australia here, not the Palestinian Territories – and this State wants to dabble, not just in foreign affairs, but the most intractable international quandary of the modern age.

Move over Bill Clinton, Yasser Arafat and Shimon Peres – your place in history has been taken by Jay Weatherill.

In New South Wales, the former Liberal premier, Mike Baird, pushed for a greater refugee intake – obviously immigration is not listed as a federal power under section 51 either. Baird announced free TAFE courses and public transport discounts for refugees and asylum seekers – I am not making this up.

It gets worse. The States seem to think they still have responsibility for Indigenous affairs too. Victoria has a group working on – wait for it – a treaty.

The website for this project notes three limitations on what can be achieved. First – the difficulty of getting the parties to agree. Fair enough. Second – it is limited by the fact it is only a State and restricted by the powers of its own constitution.

Third – because it is only a State it can only “advocate” for a national treaty, not deliver one.

You do not say. So, actually, Victoria does not need a website, working group and fact sheet about a treaty. It needs a federal government – and we have already got one.

Climate policy is another area of overreach. It was not good enough for Canberra to sign up to international climate agreements Kyoto and Paris and mandate a renewable energy target, the States decided to go further and set their own targets.

Weatherill’s 50 percent renewable target is the root cause of his power woes and, now, Daniel Andrews in Victoria is following him down that path. These places might end up wanting more money from Western Australia yet.

If this sort of local and State government overreach is not bad enough, we have this muddled federalism cutting the other way too, with Canberra poking its way into every crevice of our lives.

Just a few days ago we saw the Prime Minister go into Sydney’s Martin Place to make an announcement about – seriously – bollards. The Federal Government releasing policy on bollards – you will find that in section 51!

They have also inveigled their way into the funding arrangements of every school and hospital in this country – these were and should still be State responsibilities. Now every ribbon cutting at every school sees a crush of members of the Federal and State parliaments claiming credit while they endlessly pass the buck over problems.

Canberra has also waded into disability services – adding another massive bureaucracy to the cost of helping some of our most vulnerable.

And, through the RET, Canberra has taken ownership of every energy problem in the country. An area once left to the States is now another Federal responsibility. So invested is

Canberra in energy now that there is serious discussion of the Federal Government subsidising a new coal power station.

Think about what has transpired. The States have taken advantage of a federal subsidy scheme to overcook their renewable energy share, send their baseload generators broke and see coal-fired power stations shut down and demolished. Then they need more federal money to help build and subsidise urgent new generating capacity – and Canberra looks at spending more money building new coal-fired power stations.

And do not even think about the possible silver bullet, the nuclear solution, because all over the nation local councils have declared themselves nuclear free zones.

Federation – we have a problem.

The current Coalition Government promised reform of the Federation and taxation reform. Both effectively have been abandoned. The Government has decided reform is too hard.

Look at the shambles just trying to deal with gay marriage.

And, as I wrote in *The Weekend Australian* today (26 August 2017), how can we even think about finding national consensus and political momentum on Indigenous recognition when we do not even know who among our current politicians is constitutionally eligible to sit in Parliament? And the Indigenous debate has now been steered off into ludicrous acrimony over the inscriptions on statues.

So what is going wrong in our national affairs? Who is to blame for this paralysis and discombobulation? The public blames the politicians, the politicians blame each other and the media blames the public.

Let me take a leaf out of Donald Trump's book and place at least some of the blame with the media. Fake News has become an emotive and elusive term – it can mean just about anything you like from deliberately fabricated online stories to news you simply do not like.

But, for all his obvious faults, flaws, eccentricities and inconsistencies, Trump is right in much of his criticism of the media. They are out of touch with mainstream concerns and they are jaundiced and deceptive in their coverage of him and many of the issues with which he strongly identifies.

Trump knows the media are less trusted than even the politicians and he has shown that he can triumph by going to war with them. This is part of the reason Trump won. He identified the chasm between the media/political elite and challenged it on behalf of a disenchanted mainstream.

When CNN was caught out leaking debate questions to Hillary Clinton it just confirmed Trump's conspiracy theory. When Clinton called Trump supporters a "racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic" basket of deplorables, she confirmed the establishment's disdain for the very voters whose support they were chasing.

But listen up, we hear the same thing in Australia. When politicians and journalists talk about "dog whistling" tactics, they are expressing a belief that mainstream voters are xenophobic and gullible enough to be rallied by racist undertones.

When they over-egg their reaction to Pauline Hanson's burka stunt – calling the stunt appalling and dubbing the burka a religious garment – they suddenly find themselves supporting a tool of female oppression that even most Muslims reject. And they wonder why mainstream voters think the politicians are either out of touch or sneering at them – or both.

One of the things I am most critical of in the media, particularly the political media – the Canberra Press Gallery and those aligned to them in the Melbourne, Canberra, Sydney triangle, especially the publicly-funded broadcasters – is their groupthink.

They see things too often through the same political lens. There are articles of faith about which they seldom disagree.

They love a climate gesture, favour open borders and are fanatical about gay marriage. I have dubbed them the Love Media and it is a term that has stuck (it was not very imaginative or original, just a direct response to Bob Brown once describing the Murdoch Media as the hate media).

But it seems apt. They want to be loved by their colleagues and the Politically Correct crowd, and most of their reporting and commentary reflects that desire.

I think they should be more prepared to live a prickly life on behalf of the mainstream views and values of their audiences and readerships. In the case of the public broadcasters, that means the taxpayers who fund them.

One of the common views you will find shared among the Love Media is an attitude towards the Federation. Unsurprisingly, given they sit atop Capital Hill, they tend to be centralists. They do not think much of States' rights or competitive federalism and they support Canberra sticking its nose into just about everything. The media echo the cross-partisan political consensus that all wisdom and virtue resides in Canberra.

Journalists in the political debate tend to suffer from Stockholm syndrome. They are trapped by politicians in a never-ending partisan debate, held hostage to the news cycle, and they end up wanting to please their captors.

Many politicians do the same, falsely believing their Key Performance Indicators are all about winning media adulation. They become captives to the media agenda. Throw in the academics and bureaucrats and you have an enormously influential media/political class – all more or less isolated from the mainstream voters they are supposed to serve.

Self-referential, self-serving, self-obsessed – they actually think that social media is their connection to the masses. It actually makes the disconnect worse.

In fact, especially on Twitter, it is an unrepresentative, disrespectful, ignorant echo-chamber of green left media/political class views – where the voters are derided, Clinton-like, as deplorable.

The very geography of our national capital accentuates this disconnect. Canberra sits up there – naturally enough in rarefied atmosphere – a purpose-built capital, isolated from ports, transport hubs and industry, over-planned, inorganic, recession-proof and with no reason for existence beyond sustaining itself and lording it over the rest of us.

I have written quite a bit about this great chasm between the media/political class and the mainstream – the great Australian divide. This is not an entirely new tendency nor confined to Australia.

Oscar Wilde once said that, “By giving us the opinions of the uneducated, journalism keeps us in touch with the ignorance of the community.” My fear is that too many journalists think this is the truth and behave accordingly.

It is this disconnect that enabled journalists in the United States and around the world to underestimate Trump. And when they got it wrong they did not apologise for their mistakes – no, they blamed the voters.

In the *Guardian Australia*, Katharine Murphy put it this way: “A person with manifest disdain for facts and evidence now occupies the White House because half the country didn’t care.” That is the media/political class view. Another is that, presented with two lamentable candidates, voters opted for the lesser evil; or at least one that would shake up the establishment and did not see them as deplorable.

We have seen so many examples in Australia of where the media/political class have got it wrong and the mainstream have gotten it right. Border protection is the classic example. Strong border protection was attacked mercilessly by the Love Media

under the Howard Government.

They cheered when Labor opened the borders up. Then, when the boats started arriving, they were muted in their criticism of Labor – remember even the President of the Australian Human Rights Commission, Gillian Triggs, secretly decided to delay an inquiry. Then, when it became really bad, Labor told the journalists the influx was driven by “push factors” and could not be stopped – this was manifestly nonsense, even at the time, given we had seen what Howard had done – but the Love Media duly adopted and made this Fake News argument.

When the Coalition said it would turn boats back, Kevin Rudd said this would start a conflict with Indonesia. And this was reported as a reasonable line.

And through all of these twists and turns the Love Media followed Labor’s cues and denounced the Coalition approach. They were wrong at every turn. There was not a scintilla of consistency in their position except that they were wrong at every step.

But the public have always been right. Whether you look at election results or opinion polls, it is clear they have always understood the importance of secure borders and orderly migration.

There are many other examples of where the media/political class is wrong and the mainstream are right. Julia Gillard’s misogyny speech, carbon tax and live cattle export ban were classic examples – as was the Baird Government’s greyhound racing ban in New South Wales. These were all cheered by the Left and the media but recognised as madness by the public.

The media/political class can easily convince itself of its “truthiness” and have it reinforced constantly by “independent” and social media – but it cannot fool the public. That is the real message of the post-truth age. And the public has the ultimate

say through the ballot box.

Now the big problem with this dynamic of Fake News, Federalism and the Love Media is that it is getting worse – and bound to become an even more insidious influence on our national debate. Too much of our national debate is generated, controlled and filtered through the prism of the Canberra/Sydney/Melbourne axis. This has given the Canberra bubble and the inner city so-called elites of Sydney and Melbourne a disproportionate say in national debate.

It means the Canberra Press Gallery and the huge garrisons of publicly-funded journalists at Ultimo and Southbank dominate our national discussion, at the expense of Perth, Geraldton, Adelaide, Geelong and wherever else you like to mention.

It is why we constantly see, hear and read journalists, politicians and commentators referring to Western Sydney as if it were a foreign country. They sometimes do this even when they are sitting in a television studio just 15 kilometres down the M4 from Western Sydney.

We hear the media/political class talk about the people “out there” as if referring to people living beyond civilisation; or, at least, outside the smashed avocado belt. They talk about dog-whistling tactics deployed “out there” as if people in the regions and smaller cities are somehow more gullible, more xenophobic and more unsavoury than the media/political class.

This centralised media clique in Canberra and inner city Sydney and Melbourne dictates the political conversation for a Federation which, in the main, has more grounded values and priorities. In the suburbs and the regions people are aspirational, they value work and want to ensure their children do better than they have done. They tend to display a matter-of-fact and live-and-let-live approach to issues of social integration; they value cheap energy over climate gestures and have a practical attitude

to border protection and orderly immigration.

But in the Love Media – the media/political class – it is all about identity politics, climate gestures, virtue-signalling and post-material concerns. If you do not believe me just pour yourself a stiff drink and tune in to *Q&A*.

And here is the rub. This centralism – this diminution of the voice of the States and regions when it comes to our national discussion – is being accentuated by the structural changes in the media sector.

I do not normally quote the journalists' union but their chief, Paul Murphy, told a parliamentary inquiry just a few weeks ago that 2 500 journalist jobs have disappeared in the past six years. That is an astonishingly large number. It is enough journalists to staff 25 sizeable daily newspapers; more than a 150 television newsrooms or perhaps 300 radio newsrooms.

This total of jobs gone in less than a decade probably represents more than one-third of those working today. And the point is those jobs did not disappear from the Canberra Press Gallery or from Ultimo or Southbank.

The Press Gallery numbers have held up at about 250 journalists, still higher than they were in the 1980s when fewer than 200 worked out of Parliament House. And, as you know, in recent years the ABC has continued to expand – all the while continuing to have a higher proportion of their workforce based at Ultimo and Southbank.

So, proportionately, as the State-based and regional journalism jobs disappear, the weighting of the media/political class, the Love Media journalists in Canberra and inner city Sydney and Melbourne, continue to grow.

As the broader media workforce shrinks, this ultra-politically correct media cohort becomes more dominant. This is the reverse federalism of the Australian media.

It means State governments come under less scrutiny from

shrinking State-based journalist pools. It means regional consumers receive less local news and analysis and more of what Sydney and Canberra deem important.

We need journalists in the regions and in the State capitals. We need them to serve their communities by providing local stories, accountability and local insight on national issues.

But, just as vitally, we need them as conduits between mainstream Australians and the media/political class.

It is a two-way process.

Crucially – and sadly – the current disproportionate decline of State-based and regional media means the views of a fisherman at Esperance, a farmer on the Eyre Peninsula, a small businessman in Geelong or a hairdresser in Penrith are less likely to make their way into the national conversation.

The gap between the so-called elites – the media/political class – and the mainstream can only widen. The Love Media is becoming comparatively louder. This leads to less responsive governments, less patient electorates, less perceptive media, more acrimony and less productive democracy.

Where is my proof you ask? Where is my field evidence? That is easy, ladies and gentlemen – I simply present to you the political shambles that is Australia today.

