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Political Dope: John Howard's 'Drug War'

ON 2 NOVEMBER 1997 a press release buzzed from John Howard's office: "Prime Minister Tough on Drugs". It announced the Federal Government's National Illicit Drug Strategy, filling the great emptiness left by the scuttling of the ACT 'Heroin Trial' in September and following reports in early October of plans to exclude methadone treatment from Medicare. Howard's \$87.5 million package provoked disappointment amongst drug professionals, with in-house e-mail exchanges noting that its grandstanding language promised only a costly expansion of the 'zero tolerance' American system. 'Zero tolerance' means the technical removal of distinctions between different types of drug, different types of user, different degrees of 'offence', and no mitigating circumstance in the legal process. Zero tolerance also desocializes drugs, denies them an anthropology and history, and recasts the aim of drug policy-making as absolutist and punitive.

Howard's 'Tough' memo hinged on this concept and headed a Coalition initiative, recharged in mid-1998 in election lead-up, and recently abetted by a UNSW Press publication. *Drug Precipice*, co-authored by Athol Moffitt, John Malouf and Craig Thompson, offers itself as a work of "objective intent... an encyclopaedic type of reference work for political and other leaders"¹—a work which takes most of its benchmarks from American prohibitionist thinking. *Drug Precipice* also recycles the grand narrative of Athol Moffitt's *A Quarter to Midnight* (a title alluding to the cataclysmic 'thermonuclear clock'), a 1985 inquiry into organized crime and the 'Decline of the Institutions of State'.² The demise of the state is real enough—in welfare and health provision or its leadership role on social justice issues—but *Quarter to Midnight* attributed the destruction of the state to the crime octopus, with drugs being merely one deadly tentacle.

Now, in *Drug Precipice*, drugs emerge as the transcendent signifier of this decline.

Despite its resolve to cut through drug 'misinformation', *Drug Precipice* founders on a number of matters: not points of extraneous detail but, rather, basic intellectual principles which structure the book. One is the vision of the drug menace as centralized and monolithic; a subversive global totality, transacted in Australia through local franchises or agents, including Asians in Cabramatta and 'permissive' academic opponents of zero tolerance. A second is the suggestive, repeated image of the human body in deadly collision with the 'foreign body' which is the 'dangerous drug'; a molecular crisis, where the 'hard facts' of psycho-biological research are privileged. But the issue of drugs is always a case of mythology over pharmacology. In simple terms, drugs are socially-encoded, and the multiple subcultures configured around them—from the relatively closed cocaine club to the open-armed Ecstasy rave—are all compellingly constructed by a signifying 'struggle' involving the politics of group and identity and power. What drugs signify culturally, what they might mean, is a question that casts into doubt essentialist judgements about what they are and what they do: judgements assuming an ideologically-neutral pharmacology as the basis for demarcating 'harmful' or 'dangerous' drugs from 'benign' or 'beneficial' medicines. Drug subcultures are not the only social fractions subject to this struggle within signification. Historically, medical and legal discourses on drugs have been coloured by competing interests and contradictory chemistries, whilst peddling the illusion that they pivot on an ideology-free pharmaceuticals. The British Pharmacy Act of 1868, for example, placing limitations on opiates, was largely motivated by rivalry between pharmacists and doctors over social status

and control of supply and profits from prescription. Genuine concern over the effects of opiate use was an ancillary and mostly absent consideration; the 'danger' of opium, both sides argued, was really that it was in the wrong professional hands. Later, the same struggle was replayed in Australia.³

But these are not the main problems of *Drug Precipice*. The book reads Australia's drug experience through the lens of the American scene, recommending apolitically that Australia's leaders ape the historic paradigm-shift that has occurred Stateside. This paradigm-shift is intimately bound to the rise of economic rationalism, the deregulated market, and a radical-conservative redefinition of government. Current policy orthodoxy in both the US and Australia must be understood within this political frame. The change in the US has been summarized thus:

When Richard Nixon declared his War on Drugs, the conventional wisdom about drugs and crime was that they reflect "more than the character of the pitiful few" who engage in them and instead reveal shortcomings of "the entire society". Three decades later, we believe the opposite. Congress debates a 'Personal Responsibility Act' that exonerates society and . . . blames everything . . . on "crises of individual values".⁴

This moral devolutionism is entirely consonant with the economic-rationalist view of the public sphere as inherently atomized and competitive; the fetishization of individual enterprise and liability is a central tenet of Reagan-Thatcherism and its love-child, Howardism, in their crusades to casualize economy and privatize the state. Paradoxically, of course, this kind of devolvement also legitimizes the legal harassment and moral re-education of the individual: for the aberrant individual is the site where rational systems supposedly break down and the dream of a more 'open society' is spoiled for everyone, inviting what remnants there are of the state to re-assert themselves repressively. The issue of drugs focalizes contradictions in the ethos of economic rationalism and globalization, exposing the way in which the myth of the nation must be residually, comfortingly invoked, and its impending collapse imputed to low, narcotized Others rather than to those who are actually managing it out of existence. In this regard, fu-

ture history will remember Drug War mentality as a costly, fraudulent transference of blame for a crisis in the institutions of civil society onto the hapless figure of the demonized junky.

The image of the isolated, decommunalized drug user as sinful, biologically flawed, sick – and in all cases 'deviant' – considerably pre-dates the era of state-attenuation in which it has been recently re-activated. This image is tagged the 'Grand Theory' explanation of drugs, usefully critiqued by Allan Kellehear and Stefan Cvetkovski in the important anthology *Drug Use in Australia*. They suggest that the 'deviant' junky image, the 'Grand Theory', is particularly attractive in times of social uncertainty, stress, transition and value-confusion, where wider problems are projected onto the individual Other.⁵ The image of the junky is always ripe for appropriation, and the current Australian case is no exception. In other words, today's 'breakthrough' paradigm shift to zero tolerance is an amnesiac version of many yesterdays; a shift which erases the complex specifics of drug sociology, history and ideological manipulation, as surely as John Howard wants to bury the 'Black Arm-Band' view of Australia's past.

Likewise, the authors of *Drug Precipice* selectively rewrite the past, pursuing the claim that Australia's current drug problem is unprecedented. *Drug Precipice* paints a jaded national portrait of Australia on the brink of narco-anarchy: a scenario which appeared in relation to the anti-opium campaigns of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the cocaine panics of the 1920s, the amphetamine craze after the Second World War and the psychedelic protest culture of the 1960s and 70s. The view of a drug-induced crisis in the apparatuses of the state, from the suburban kitchen to the courtroom, would have been particularly familiar to tabloid readers of the period between the world wars – a time when drug scandals were deemed as culpable as militarism, fascism, bolshevism and global depression in the destabilization of nation-states. One of the central arguments of *Drug Precipice* is that public opinion must be won back again in these affrighted terms; that Australia should be shocked out of complacency, overcome its sense of defeatism (the view that drug use is an inevitable social fact of modernity) and civil libertarianism ('harm minimization' and 'responsible use' approaches) and embrace, instead, a 'no-use' policy grounded in American thinking.

This reclamation of public opinion involves another historical rewrite and another kind of 'grand theory'. *Drug Precipice* regards Australia's drug scene as comprehensively shaped by the American experience, imitatively, interpreting this as a crisis in liberal democracy – "the more liberal and democratic the nation, the greater the drug problems".⁶ From there, *Drug Precipice* sets up a showdown between two imaginary blocs. The first is an organic union of the paternalist welfare state (now long deceased) and 'people power' (lately reborn). The second bloc is the drug specialists and dope fiends who have monopolized the public podium for thirty years (the myth of a power that never existed) – but those primarily "responsible were adult intellectuals bent on removing legal restraints on the freedom of individuals to make their own 'responsible' choices about drug use".⁷ Forces of the left, 'permissive' lobbyists and academics, with inexplicably bottomless financial resources (possibly, *Drug Precipice* speculates, from organized crime) and unlimited media access, have infiltrated the education system, hijacked debate and distorted public awareness of drugs: a syndrome seen, historically, in the linkage of drugs and the first death-blow dealt to liberal democracy by those who opposed the Vietnam war. History is travestied into conspiracy theory, but in this *Drug Precipice* is not a lonely aberration. The book's anti-intellectualism conjures with a pervasive cultural mood, and sits beside headline-grabbing works like Paul Sheehan's *Among the Barbarians*, with its swipes at the "outdated Marxist analysis" and "academic Marxism" which have conducted a "methodical and destructive assault on Australian history"⁸ – a history which, like the Drug War, people power must win back.

Supporters of the *Drug Precipice* line, and Howard's 'common-sense tough on drugs' stand, should read Dan Baum's *Smoke and Mirrors*. Subtitled 'The War on Drugs and the Politics of Failure', it studies the last three decades of America's experience of interdiction and prohibition, exposing bureaucratic incompetencies and the shameless, self-interested grasping for opinion-poll popularity and electoral survival which are chronic to US narcotics policy-making. The authors of *Drug Precipice* concede a similar situation in Australia – "Political action against drugs has always been popular in Australia and therefore politically advantageous"⁹ – but their clear implication is that this opportunism is forgiveably moral underneath. At

a micro level, *Smoke and Mirrors* discusses dimensions of the drug war which are publicly invisible: personalities, career aspirations and malicious power struggles in government agencies; byzantine back-room deals and trade-offs; the deficient working knowledge behind the 'tough on drugs' mind-set of successive administrations. In a cynical mobilization of public outrage at 'the drug problem', six American presidents (Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush and Clinton) raised instant moral capital by spending billions of taxpayer dollars to criminalize millions of ordinary persons, with no results, in the golden age of economic rationalism and out-sourcing or abolition of state services.

Apparently, however, there are some facets of government in the US and Australia which are exempt from fiscal accountability, and drug moralism and the money-pit zero tolerance option fit this category. If any other federal program cost so much to deliver so little so continually it would be thrown on the junk-heap. In addition to the \$87.5 million shot in the arm in 1997, and an additional eighty million pledged to the war on drugs by Howard in June 1998, Australian governments spend over \$400 million annually, on what two Melbourne University criminologists called an "enterprise with limited capacity to demonstrate what goals it is achieving".¹⁰ In the US the wastage is bigger. Baum writes:

Under Bill Clinton, the War on Drugs continues to consume more federal dollars than the Commerce, Interior and State Departments put together. While we argue about whether the country can afford foreign aid, the Environmental Protection Agency, public broadcasting, or the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities, the federal drug budget quietly exceeds all of them combined.¹¹

Smoke and Mirrors strikes chords which have an instant Australian resonance.

Macroscopically, *Smoke and Mirrors* is an indictment of official malpractice and corruption, without even touching upon the role of drugs in the 'Iran-Contra' affair; the deployment of narcotics as an official instrument of US geopolitics in the Vietnam debacle, revealed in 1972 by Alfred W. McCoy's *The Politics of Heroin in South-East Asia*; or, in an Australian-American Alliance context, the 'no worries' diplomatic com-

pliance suggested by John Pilger. In *A Secret Country*, Pilger writes that as Saigon was about to fall in 1975 "massive supplies of drugs which had been stashed in Vietnam" were flown to safety in Australia, landing on secret 'black airfields' maintained by the CIA. US intelligence agent William Corson confided this to Pilger, but added that the narcotics were quickly "redistributed to 'regional drug banks', thus providing the 'reserve currency' of international criminal activities associated with CIA covert action".¹²

(Intriguingly, this 'redistribution' was concurrent with a cannabis drought in Australia, and the flooding of the local market with affordable heroin.) The association of US strategic interests and organized crime was, indeed, the foundation on which the post-1945 narcotics trade was largely built: the fast, efficient move by Euro-American 'mafias' into drugs in the mid-to-late forties was facilitated by Washington's sponsorship of crime syndicates to subvert communism in the west,

using narcotics to bankroll 'pro-democracy' terrorism, arms dealing, anti-trades-union propaganda and right-wing political campaigning. All this suggests a very different complexion for the catch-phrase 'Drug War'.

As moral example or acknowledged legislator of the world's drug accords, the US is somewhat tarnished. Drug prohibition policy has been one of America's most successful exports from the turn of the century, after its acquisition of the Philippines in 1898. There, concern over Chinese opium-smoking, the colony's productivity, and the recreational attractions of drugs to a bored occupying garrison led to the conceptualization of drugs as a national security problem, linked to colonialism and America's arrival on the international stage. 'Drugs' was the issue which established America's role as World Policeman, but US motives were not always wholesome. As early as 1906, when President Theodore Roosevelt was asked by Bishop Charles Brent to address the opium problem in the east on religious grounds, the US government eagerly saw an ethical response as a front for cementing Sino-American trade relations. This was continued through America's chief international narcotics negotiator Hamilton Wright, and studies like John Palmer Gavit's worldwide best-seller *Opium* (1925), whose especial denigration of Britain's record in the opium business

was designed to establish America's moral credentials as a means of opening Chinese markets to the US as a preferred trading partner.

Successive US administrations have prevailed upon aid-dependent client states to transform their regional (often traditional indigenous) economies, their legal systems and, occasionally, their basic governmental processes – all in the cause of protecting Middle America from the 'foreign' drug 'scourge',

'plague', 'epidemic' or 'invasion'. In this connection, from the beginning of the twentieth century drugs were also a catalyst for America's economic and strategic expansionism; with the so-called 'American system' of international prohibition, representing a transparently colonialist redefinition of US domestic crisis as something produced 'elsewhere'. Wars on drugs are a paramilitary, legalistic and rhetorical means of protecting the imperialist centre from recalcitrant margins which threaten to

'stone it to death'; drug wars invoke a vestigial sense of the nation-state's integrity, and exploit the necessary Otherings which ideologically predispose home-ground to accept checkpoints, body searches, patrol boats and helicopters – the hard reality of borders – as well as modes of surveillance and the erosion of common rights designed to catch the devious 'Other-Within'.

This, then, is part of an elided history which should balance the view that today's drug problem results from the hijacking of public debate by powerful left-wing lobbyists and drug-taking ideologues. Historically, the drug 'problem' is as close to the corridors of power as its solution – the 'Drug War'. In slightly more abstract terms, Baum notes that America's War on Drugs has been "a precious metaphor"¹³ – meaning, that the phrase 'Drug War' is a rhetorical node which attempts to resolve a number of social conflicts in a mystifying display of government responsibility and moral re-armament. Richard Nixon's first War on Drugs was consciously declared at a moment when the war in Vietnam showed signs of being lost: the Drug War entailed a deft transposition, or compensation-fantasy, for embattled US prestige. The same applies to besieged peacetime governments in Australia, whose 'tough', pro-active determination on matters like drugs requires constant critical scrutiny.

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Stephen Murray-Smith's 'Censorship and Literary Studies' (1970) remains one of the best arguments for this much-needed critical vigilance. In the parallel context of censorship, Murray-Smith wrote that the raising of political capital through interdictive legislation not only establishes a bond between politicians and the majority population unaffected by legal prohibitions, but is also 'cathartic' for politicians themselves – "the kind of authoritative, unambiguous, far-reaching and morally righteous action which politicians would like to be taking all the time, but which in most cases the nature of politics itself does not permit".¹⁴ In public life, however, the politician's catharsis is usually someone's nemesis: the conscription of public opinion under the generalship of politicians in the Drug War requires monitoring, and questioning, as to who the winners and casualties really are.

As with so much of the Howard Coalition's derivative agenda, its current drug policy has absorbed many of the historical and ideological traces, and rhetorical manoeuvres, of the US system. One such manoeuvre is manifest in the catalogue of woes with which the drug trade is rhetorically associated. Yet the woes transposed onto drugs are systemic to capital itself, so that the drug trade is not quite the Other but, rather, the Brother of licit commerce. As a brilliantly 'precious metaphor', the black economy of drugs shadows and parodies its twin, late capitalism, mythically operating in a way that many ordinary Australians might more readily associate with the downside of globalization: the effortless trafficking of commodities across frontiers; the consequent diminishment of national sovereignty; the dominance of cartels and the disempowerment of small business; the immense accumulation of untaxable wealth and undistributed profit; the destruction of families and communities; alienating changes to traditional social practices.

The concept of 'zero tolerance', too, has a disturbing metaphoric ring in the present Australian political climate. Junkies have always been easy targets in diagnoses of what ails the body politic, and the 'dope fiend' has become the folk devil 'par excellence' of the century.¹⁵ But the dope fiend's extreme, deviated position may no longer be unique in Australia. So many sensitive issues here – Native Title, immigration, 'Asianization', unemployment, waterfront 'reform' – have lately involved wilful misinformation, qualified prejudice and outright intolerance as legitimate plat-

forms for decision-making and carrying public opinion. The zero tolerance policy applied to drug users is now officially, if tacitly, dispensed across the board. In a situation where the death of 'political correctness' and the return of a peculiar brand of 'free speech' is promoted by Howard, and in fellow-travelling populist polemics like Sheehan's *Among the Barbarians*, the junky's fate foreshadows the fate of all those for whom low tolerance might soon reach absolute zero.

ENDNOTES

1. Athol Moffitt, John Malouf & Craig Thompson, *Drug Precipice*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1998, p. xii.
2. Athol Moffitt, *A Quarter to Midnight: The Australian Crisis: Organised Crime and the Decline of the Institutions of State*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1985.
3. Virginia Berridge & Griffith Edwards, *Opium and the People: Opiate Use in Nineteenth-Century England*, Yale UP, New Haven, 1987; Desmond Manderson, *From Mr Sin to Mr Big: A History of Australian Drug Laws*, OUP, Melbourne, 1993.
4. Dan Baum, *Smoke and Mirrors: The War on Drugs and the Politics of Failure*, Back Bay Books, New York, 1997, p. ix.
5. Allan Kellehear & Stefan Cvetkovski, 'Grand Theories of Drug Use', *Drug Use in Australia: A Harm Minimisation Approach*, Margaret Hamilton, Allan Kellehear and Greg Rumbold (eds), OUP, Melbourne, 1998, pp. 48–59.
6. *Drug Precipice*, p. xii.
7. *Drug Precipice*, p. 123.
8. Paul Sheehan, *Among the Barbarians: The Dividing of Australia*, Random House, Sydney, 1998, pp. 25, 35.
9. *Drug Precipice*, p. 195.
10. Adam Sutton & Steve James, quoted in Diana Bagnall, 'Agony and Ecstasy', *The Bulletin*, 15 April 1997, p. 18.
11. *Smoke and Mirrors*, p. viii.
12. John Pilger, *A Secret Country*, Vintage, London, 1991, p. 194.
13. *Smoke and Mirrors*, p. viii.
14. Stephen Murray-Smith, 'Censorship and Literary Studies', *Australia's Censorship Crisis*, eds Geoffrey Dutton & Max Harris, Sun Books, Melbourne, 1970, p. 80.
15. Jock Young, 'The myth of druggtakers in the mass media', *The Manufacture of News: Social problems, deviance and the mass media*, eds Stanley Cohen & Jock Young, Constable & Sage, London, 1981, p. 327.

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