Politics by the rich, for the people

Author: Michael Gawenda

22 Aug 2012 7:05 AM

Australian politics has been colonised by post-modernism. This is the case not just in Australia and the colonisation is not just about politics. Nothing is true and everything is true. Everything is contested and every narrative is equally valid.

And there are thousands of narratives out there, especially in the digital universe, alternate realities, each one fiercely held, each one of equal value, each one equally valid. These are not, in the main, fact-based realities. Fact-based reality no longer exists.

Take the case of Julian Assange. WikiLeaks has done work which should be – and has been – supported and applauded by most mainstream journalists and by millions of people around the world. There was a time when many journalists thought that WikiLeaks had pioneered a new form of investigative journalism that would transform the way journalists gather information, employing tools that would help them get past the barriers of secrecy, spin and confiscation that characterises all governments including governments supposedly committed to openness.

Yet Assange, holed up in the embassy of Ecuador in London, has managed to paint himself as a political prisoner, a stateless political refugee seeking protection from governments who would throw him in jail and throw away the key if they got their hands on him.

Of course this is nonsense. Assange is wanted for questioning in Sweden for two alleged sexual assaults and has gone through the British courts with some of the best legal minds working on his case and those courts have ruled that he should be extradited to Sweden to face that questioning.
We are asked to believe, on no evidence at all, that Sweden is actually doing the bidding of the United States and once the Swedes have Assange in their clutches, they will swiftly send him on to the US where he will be put on trial on trumped up espionage charges and most likely be executed.

Assange has many qualities, but above there is his ability to retail compelling conspiracy fantasies in an age where every conspiracy theorist is an online publisher and where virtually anything is believable if you believe hard enough and long enough and skilfully enough.

Talking about non-fact based competing realities, in the US, the presidential election will be decided it seems not on the basis of whether Obama or Romney is best equipped to deal with the challenges that confront America, but on the basis of which camp has the most money to spend on advertising in key swing states.

The billions of dollars that will be spent during the campaign, much of it coming from billionaires in the grip of some lunacy or other, will be spent on advertising that peddles what can only be described as malign fantasies about Obama.

The Obama camp will have no hesitation in peddling similar fantasies but to a lesser extent – after all, the Obama camp has fewer billionaires than Team Romney.

There are no facts in a post-modernist world, just competing narratives, suffused with anger and a sense that the place in which people live is no longer recognisable.

In America, this can in part be explained by the fact that after five years of economic decline, the country remains mired in economic stagnation. Optimism about the future and about America’s place in the world has given way to a dull, helpless pessimism which challenges that most cherished of American qualities, a belief in American exceptionalism.
Economic stagnation cannot, however, explain the pessimism about the future amongst Australians, the rancorousness of the political debate, the sense that everything is contested, nothing is true, no facts are established, that there are just competing realities from which we chose the one that most fits our anxieties.

For the past five years, Australians have lived in a bubble unaffected by the GFC, by the deepest recession in most parts of the developed world since the depression of the 1930s. A government that has managed – with more than a little help from China – to keep the Australian economy out of recession and unemployment – even in the south-eastern states – at levels the EU and the US would die for, is almost certainly going to lose the next election in a landslide.

And not because Australians have any great faith in a Tony Abbott led Coalition but essentially because a majority of Australians, it seems, dislike Julia Gillard and find her not to be believed at best and a tricky dissembler at worst. Of course this has been a politically pathetic government and Gillard’s prime ministership has been marked by ineptness and timidity.

Look at the way Gillard has handled the education debate. Instead of embracing the Gonski recommendations, she has gone out of her way to reassure the private school sector, especially the elite private schools, that whatever the government decides on funding, these schools will be better off under her government’s reforms.

In reality, the impression she has created is the opposite of what Gonski recommended, which was a major injection of funding for disadvantaged state schools. That’s where the extra billions Gonski said would be needed would go. Yes, the political reality is that reducing funding for non-government schools is impossible, but the thrust of the Gonski recommendations are designed to address the fact that there is increasing education inequality in Australia.

And the current funding model, John Howard’s funding model, which was
designed to boost private school education – Howard called it offering parents choice – is to blame.

Gillard can’t bring herself to say any of this. Instead, she lauds the top private schools as role models – every school a Geelong Grammar. Is that the education revolution she has in mind? So much sound and fury signifying nothing much at all because in reality, having sat on the Gonski report for months, the Gillard government is still wrestling with how much of it to implement. What a way to go about the process of major reform.

But this intense dislike of Gillard can’t be explained simply by her political ineptitude. The contempt, the verbal violence, with which she has been treated by some shock jocks, the virulent, mad hatred of her out there in the blogosphere, says more about the haters than the hated.

Which brings us to the controversy over the so-called Slater and Gordon affair. To a certain extent, this affair has been fanned by Gillard haters out in the blogosphere. This is not to suggest that The Australian has retailed the sort of vile rubbish that some of the bloggers have disseminated. It hasn’t. But its reporting and editorialising on the affair has been…well weird.

Reading The Australian closely it remains very hard to understand what this affair is all about. What questions does Gillard need to answer about her time as a lawyer for Slater and Gordon? What are the accusations that can – and have been – made against her? Is it about her choice of boyfriends? Are there accusations that can be made that she acted unethically or even illegally? Is it about her disagreements with partners at Slater and Gordon?

After a careful reading of The Australian’s editorial on Monday I remain in the dark about what specific questions she needs to answer.

Things have reached a state beyond farce. The independent MP Andrew Wilkie, can urge Gillard to make a statement to the parliament about the Slater and Gordon affair while readily admitting that he has no idea what it is about or what questions the prime minister might need to answer in
parliament.

This is almost akin to Donald Trump continuing to urge Barack Obama to release evidence to prove that Obama was born in the US, evidence that Trump can’t specify, but that would be more compelling than Obama’s birth certificate.

So there you are, that’s my narrative. And I’m sticking to it.
Train to sustain success

EDGAR D’SOUZA

NATIONAL Skills Week, now in its second year, will shine a spotlight on the hundreds of career opportunities and thousands of training places available to Australians.

Minister for Tertiary Education, Skills, Science and Research, Chris Evans, said the week was a time for a collaborative approach dedicated to raising the status of practical and vocational learning.

“To compete for the jobs of tomorrow, Australians will need to be increasingly more qualified,” Senator Evans said at the national launch of the event last week.

“Better skills not only lead to better pay and employment outcomes for the individual, but an investment in skills is also an investment in higher productivity and a sustainable economy.”

Senator Evans said the Federal Government was investing $15.6 billion in skills and training over the next four years to ensure all Australians are able to maximise their potential to participate in the workforce.

“The $700 million National Workforce Development fund is making it easier for businesses and employees to get the training they need,” he said.

SkillsOne chief executive Brian Wexham said National Skills Week would provide a positive focus on Vocational Education and Training (VET).

“It will bring to life the positive messages, highlighting the talents, skills and the value of apprentices and trainees across Australia to the wider public and employers,” he said.

Every year the diversity and depth of talent is showcased at the Australian Training Awards, with each state and territory acknowledging its best candidates in VET via the State Training Awards.

Winners of the state awards then become nominees in the Australian Training Awards, which this year will be held in Melbourne on November 16.

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Passion for trade

MINISTER for Higher Education and Skills and the Minister responsible for the Teaching Profession, Peter Hall, will do the honours at the Victoria launch of National Skills Week in Melbourne on August 27.

To be held at the Kino Cinema, guests will get to share the experiences of three young workers as they tell their stories.

The trio are this year’s Apprentice of the Year finalist, Sevag Parseghian, Trainee of the Year finalist, Stephanie Greene, and Justin Stankovic of East Coast Aviation in Traralgon.

The night will also see the premiere of Le Chef, a French culinary tale about having a passion for your trade and what hard work can bring.

Catering for the event will be handled by Victoria University Academy Sofitel culinary students.

Work Place Connect chief executive Nicholas Wyman said by 2015, Australia would need 2.4 million new workers with Certificate 3 (apprentice level) qualifications.

As such it was imperative to encourage and engage more young people in skilled careers.

“Given the limited number of young people entering the pipeline, many businesses may find it hard to find workers in the future.” he said.
'Changes benefit schools'

QUEENSLAND Senator Jan McLucas has dismissed George Christensen’s claims that Mackay schools will be worse off under proposed changes to education funding.

“Every school in Mackay will receive a boost in funding under the Gillard government’s plan for school improvement,” Senator McLucas said.

“In fact, funding for every school – government, independent and Catholic – will continue to rise under our plan.”

The Federal Government commissioned a review led by David Gonski into the way schools are funded. The Gonski Review found that schools with similar needs often ended up with different amounts of government funding – and this was not fair, Senator McLucas said.

The Review recommends a new way of funding schools. It would mean each student at every school – government, Catholic and Independent – would be funded on a consistent basis.

“We always said that no school will lose a dollar of funding per student as a result of any changes to the school funding system, and that remain the case.

“Our government has already doubled funding for schools and every school in the local area has benefited. We are now working to improve the school system so that every school can deliver a high quality education for every child.

“Parents, teachers, principals can be assured that their school will continue to see its funding increase under the Federal Government.”
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Winners of this year’s Australian Apprentice and Trainee of the Year Awards, which are presented in five industry areas, are also acknowledged at the national awards.

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He said the government was partnering with employers through the National Workforce Development Fund to help train new employees and upskill existing workers.

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“We want to make sure Australians from all walks of life are able to maximise their potential to participate in the workforce and share directly in our continuing prosperity.

“The opportunities are endless,” he said.

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MARKETS

Funds a boost for rural youth

THE education aspirations of local youth are set to receive a much needed kick-start, with a continued funding boost for the Goulburn and District Education Foundation.

The Country Education Foundation of Australia (CEFA) has announced it will continue its partnership with the Origin Foundation, formed in 2011, for another three years.

Funding will help to increase the annual grant-making capacity of CEFA’s local education foundations, including the Goulburn and District Education Foundation.

CEFA is a not-for-profit organisation which works to assist rural and regional youth across Australia to pursue their post high school education, training and vocation goals.

CEFA provides students with much needed financial assistance, support and encouragement to overcome some of the extra obstacles faced, including travel and living away from home expenses.

It costs rural students substantially more than their metropolitan counterparts to pursue tertiary education. Often, the enormity of these costs can prevent rural students from achieving their educational goals.

The Origin Foundation’s funding will support the Goulburn and District Education Foundation’s annual grant-making activity, allowing the committee to increase financial assistance and support given to local youth as they pursue further education, training and vocations.

“Since our partnership began in 2011, we have seen the direct impact of the Origin Foundation's support of young people in our local education foundation communities right around Australia," explained CEFA Chairman, Nick Burton Taylor.

“Our relationship with the Origin Foundation is very special given the synergies shared by our organisations. We have the same aspiration to assist rural youth in achieving their post high school education goals and increase their life opportunities."

Head of the Origin Foundation, Sean Barrett says it has been rewarding to see the positive impacts of the CEFA program on students.

“The Origin Foundation is focused on education, training and development as pathways to brighter futures for individuals and their communities. The CEFA model of operation delivers for the individual and the community and that’s why we support them,” Mr Barrett said.

“CEFA does a fantastic job; the facts speak for themselves. Ninety percent of people successfully complete their courses. I was impressed by one young person who said he could not afford to fail because he would be letting down his parents and his community.”

CEFA is a national not-for-profit organisation which works to ensure that as many young people as possible from rural Australia have the opportunity to pursue their chosen post high school education, training or vocation aspirations by providing much needed financial assistance and support.

It does this by establishing local Education Foundations across rural and regional Australia which raise funds to provide grants to local students so that they may be able to make a successful transition from high school into the next phase of their life. It currently has over 40 Education Foundations across Australia and are continually working to increase our footprint across rural Australia. Grants for rural students are not awarded on the basis of academic success. The local Education Foundations select recipients based on criteria that determine the applicants’ dedication to achieving their goals and financial need. They also support a diverse range of pursuits including apprenticeships, traineeships, cadetships, degrees, diplomas and certificate level studies.

The Origin Foundation is a philanthropic foundation established by Origin Energy in 2010. Its focus, chosen by the people of Origin, is the power of education, training, and development to transform lives and improve communities.

Through a Grant Program, the Foundation provides funding to groups that share a belief in the potential of education to change lives. The Foundation also provides partners with access to the time and skills of Origin people and matches donations by Origin employees to their favourite charities.
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BETTER skills equal a better life for individuals and a better nation for us all.
That’s the equation the federal government hopes to hammer home during National Skills Week 2012. Tertiary Education and Skills Minister Chris Evans said the week aims to showcase the many career opportunities that are out there and inspire Australians to take up training and get the skills they need for jobs.
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Picture: KYM SMITH
Milestone for TAFE

TAFE will celebrate 130 years in Queensland as National Skills Week showcases the diversity of careers for apprentices and trainees this month.

More than 200,000 students are expected to be trained at TAFE this year – a far cry from the first class of only a dozen students in North Brisbane School of Arts on September 4, 1882.

The anniversary comes as National Skills Week (August 27-September 2) promotes emerging skills areas and aims to inspire jobseekers to improve their qualifications.

News Limited – publisher of the Ipswich News – is supporting the week, as well as industry, TAFE, the private vocational education sector and government.

TAFE now offers more than 800 programs state-wide across 70 locations. The Ipswich News circulation area contains 8000 skilled workers who have trade qualifications, according to Roy Morgan research. It is just not school leavers training.

Government figures reveal that 166,798 vocational education students aged 50 to 59 nationally were training to get a job, and 209,402 to get extra skills for their positions.

Nationally 2.48 million people are in vocational education to get a job
More than 340,900 are studying to start their own business
A further 611,780 to get a better job or promotion

Source: National Centre for Vocational Education Research
OP system may have reached use-by date

A REDUCTION in the number of Queensland high school students opting to gain an OP (overall position) score could mean the system will be phased out over the next few years.

Under the current OP system, students leaving year 12 are awarded an OP between 1 (the highest score) and 25, according to their academic results. Their score then determines which university courses they can enter.

About 82 per cent of high school students studied subjects that made them eligible to gain an OP when the system was first introduced in 1992.

Currently, just over 55 per cent of students graduating from Queensland high schools obtain an OP, with just under 40 per cent of those students then using the score to enter a university degree.

Vocational Education and Training (VET) and apprenticeship courses - subjects not relevant to the OP score - are also on the rise, with 45 per cent of Australia’s school based apprenticeships being offered in Queensland schools.

Education Minister John-Paul Langbroek said the figures meant the relevance of the OP system was being questioned.

“Changes have occurred over two decades including a reduction in the number of students studying straight OP calculated subjects versus the growing number of students choosing VET. That means whatever system Queensland uses, it has to reflect the needs of students once they leave school,” he said.

Flagstone State Community College principal Jude Fox said any changes made to the OP system would need to take into account the needs of the wide range of year 12 students across the state.

“The OP system has served us well over many years,” Ms Fox said.

“However, there is no doubt that having an OP is becoming less relevant to our students as the demand for vocational subjects and Certificate level courses increases. Any new system (would need) to take into consideration the work students do in all of their subjects.”

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TRAINING FOR A BETTER LIFE

Sarah Sharples

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National Skills Week is August 27 to September 2. With Australia continuing to see an increased demand for skilled labour, Senator Evans said job-seekers would need to be increasingly better qualified to compete for the jobs of tomorrow.

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Tertiary Education and Skills Minister Chris Evans is urging people to train today for the jobs of tomorrow.

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In its second year, the week is designed to highlight the huge variety of opportunities and careers available through vocational education and training. An additional 2.4 million workers will be needed with qualifications at certificate III or higher by 2015, says Skills Australia.

Tertiary Education and Skills Minister Chris Evans is urging people to train today for the jobs of tomorrow. Picture: KYM SMITH
Students earn training prize

THREE former Ferny Grove State High School students – Rebecca Button, Ashley Lake and Belinda Winch – have been recognised for their skills and commitment to their vocational education and training.

They were among 500 students who were awarded the 2011 Australian vocational student prize.

Each recipient received $2000 to recognise their achievements. Acting Minister for School Education Chris Evans named the winners last week.

“Through their studies, winners of these awards have gained a better understanding of the workplace and have developed industry-specific skills.”
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It is just not school leavers training. Government figures reveal that 166,798 vocational education students aged 50 to 59 nationally were training to get a job, and 209,402 to get extra skills for their position.

WHY TRAIN?

- Nationally 2.48 million people are in vocational education to get a job
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Source: National Centre for Vocational Education Research
National Skills Week

NOW in its second year, the event shines a spotlight on the hundreds of career opportunities and training places available for Australians of all ages. It's also an occasion for industries to highlight success stories and raise the status of vocational education and training.

PAGES 14-15

Train to sustain success

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Picture: KYM SMITH
TAFE sets the pace on vocations

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Public money earns its independence

Noel Hadjimichael says all students should get the same funding and their parents should be able to use this money and add their own to buy private education (Letters, August 22). This he justifies because we do not ration out defence, road safety or border control like we do education funding.

He doesn’t recognise that national defence, road safety or border control, like public education, are public goods. Is he suggesting we should allow the wealthy to purchase their own militia, private police and courts and select their own immigration system?

Brenton White Mosman

Let’s call a spade a spade. An “independent” private school is actually a “federally funded” private school. Not all that independent, but definitely private.

Pamela Wood McMahons Point

Does Rebecca Clarke (Letters, August 22) realise that 80 per cent of all school funding goes to government schools, which make up 68 per cent of the school population? With the help of parents, private schools manage to educate 32 per cent of school students with 20 per cent of public funds.

I think it is clear who has got the maths right.

Frank Adshead Mona Vale

Hooray! Australia’s next High Court judge, Stephen Gageler, received a public school education – just like the former High Court justice Michael Kirby (“Black belt barrister to fight for justice from the High Court bench”, August 22).

John de Bres Rose Bay

It seems to me that the crucial finding of the Gonski review was quoted in the article on the front page of the Herald (“Abbott: public schools get too much”, August 21), which states that “over 80 per cent of students who did not reach the level required for proficiency to participate in society in reading and mathematics are in government schools”.

I was reminded of an item I read once which said that the Louisiana Department of Corrections was using the reading score of grade five and six students in public schools to predict the growth in the number of prison cells needed to be constructed in 10 years’ time. A chilling thought.

Peter Stubbs Gungahlin (ACT)
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