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The Australian Election Campaign Begins

Twenty-Four Hour Banality

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“Big fan of LBJ, me mum,” said Chris Uhlmann, journalist for the ABC’s Twenty-Four hour television news network. And that, perhaps, was the only thing of any interest in what must be regarded as one of the most boring exhibitions of television in decades. The topic? Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull’s journey to seek the Governor General’s permission to dissolve both houses of parliament. An election looms.

A twenty-four hour news station on a Sunday is bound to be desperate for material, and in a country where nothing much happens of global significance, apart of a desire to intervene in distant theatres at Washington’s behest, journalists tend to clutch at straws of commentary. The camera becomes, in that sense, the accessory to the dull speech and observation, a colluding agent in a spectacle of the dreary.



The ABC's media chopper had been commissioned to supply dull aerial pictures of the drive in from the Canberra airport of Australia's Governor General, representative of Australia's de jure head, the Queen of England. ABC journalists embroidered the pictures with the obvious. "That is the Governor General, Sir Peter Cosgrove, coming off the plane." Who else could it have been? Nothing as exciting as a conspirator inspired by a coup d'état.

Why Cosgrove has been bothered on this cold, rainy Sunday is that Prime Minister Turnbull has sought to push through legislation and failed because of an obstructionist senate, notably the bill that would create the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC). By in large, the budget has also been opposed by the Australian Labor Party.

In the twenty-four live scram for information, commenting journalists struggle to find fun facts. Uhlmann reminds Australians of the visit by President Lyndon Baines Johnson in 1966, designed, he inventively interprets, solely fur the purpose of shoring up Prime Minister Harold Holt's electoral chances. Australians were fighting the good war against communist yellow hordes, and needed reassurance they had backed, and packed, the right horse.

The US President seemed to be relaxed enough, and got whammed during dinner at The Lodge. The giant felt boisterously home. Australian puritans, ever concerned about how leaders should behave, have since commented that it was troubling for the "Leader of the Free World, his finger on nuclear triggers, to be a man who has the balance of his mind disturbed by the demon drink" (*Canberra Times*, Jun 11, 2012).

More inconsequential commentary. "The motorcade is turning into King's Avenue.... You might be able to see Parliament." In truth, there is little to see, with heavy rain and fog enshrouding some of the journey. The Governor General's residence seems to hover in Gothic darkness, with various individuals visible only as silhouettes.

Desperation is palpable amongst the rambling observers, and updates showing journalists in the miserable rain suggest they would rather be somewhere else. (The remote Australian capital can be rather miserable as the winter commences.)

Unnecessary questions, mostly of the unanswerable type, follow in what becomes an echo chamber of uncertainty. Will the PM spend ten to fifteen minutes with the Governor General? What will be worn? This is democracy (to be exact, constitutional monarchy) in gradual atrophy: a discussion about the clothing attire of a de facto head-of-state, in conversation with a de jure representative of a monarch, governance by bauble.

"Sir Peter seems to travel light." Another observation about why the GG might be carrying his own bag. Surely such bags are heavy, and for that reason, require a retinue to assist? And just to try to make things more interesting, the commentary team give viewers another fun fact: Sir Peter was one of the last grand experiments of ceremony by the previous, now deposed Prime Minister, Tony Abbott. Finding the knighting system irresistibly chic, Abbott decided to add the Governor General to the ranks by advising the Queen, through the GG, to accept it himself. Sir Peter, rise!

Another aside from Uhlmann et al follows, and we get a few remarks about those death cap mushrooms which have shown their fungal power in Canberra. "The thing with dead caps is that they can occur anywhere there are established oak trees," noted the ACT chief health officer Paul Kelly (ABC News, Feb 3). The signs for the political motorcade heading through the city were unmistakably frank: "Warning. Do not eat deadly death cap mushrooms."

Finally, something sensible.
There is less disagreement about what is in store for the Australian's worn out electorate, who will be going to the polls on July 2. "We are seeing the longest election campaign in election history," remarks another ABC anchor. This will strain concentration, and expenditures for the major political parties.

For eight weeks, Australia, an overly electioneered country, will be bombarded with advertisements, the detritus of dead trees and electronic warfare in an effort that is likely to lead to the re-election of the incumbent government.

By no means is that a foregone conclusion. Long election campaigns provide room for slips and space for tripping. "Elections," writes Mike Steketee with trite obviousness, "can throw up many imponderables and the longer the campaign runs the more likely they are to do so" (*The Drum*, Mar 25).

The 1984 campaign, for instance, was even shorter than what is about to take place in Australia, and saw Prime Minister Bob Hawke's confidence deflated by conservative opposition leader Andrew Peacock. Peacock ceased being a political afterthought.

Whether it is a dull union functionary or a former high flying lawyer who makes the cut is, to a large extent, of little consequence. We are guaranteed to a show of the banal – and more twenty-four hour television.

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