

The Queen and Me

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I grew up in Yarralumla. Then it was the name of a fairly ordinary Canberra suburb and not a synonym for the Governor General. But we knew what was at the end of Dunrossil Drive and would go there each year for the fete where we would ride the flying fox and eat toffee apples.

My father then was a fairly junior public servant. When he and my mother moved from Hobart to Canberra in 1951, they lived in the garage of Lennox (later Sir Lennox) Hewitt while waiting for a government house to become available. Canberra in the 1950s was somnolent, homogeneous and without a lake. The oppressive spirit of Menzies hung over the place.

I am told that when I was about one I was taken up to Adelaide Avenue to wave at the young Queen Elizabeth as she drove by.

Unlike Menzies (whom my spinster aunt used to call 'old fat-arse'), I will not love her till the day I die, but from an early age I felt that I had a special relationship with Queen Elizabeth. I think it was because she had an uncanny resemblance to my mother. I look at her face every day on my Coronation tea caddy.

When I was eight I travelled with my family to Sydney where we boarded a ship for England. My father had been appointed as the Public Service Board representative to the Australian High Commission in The Strand. The ship was the *Arcadia*, one of the grand ocean liners owned by the P&O Line that reeked of Britishness. In the early sixties it was cheaper to spend eight weeks travelling first class to England on a liner than to fly.

We settled near Wimbledon. I went to the local primary school. One day on the way to school I stopped at the pedestrian crossing to wait for the lolly pop man in a white coat to interrupt the traffic. A man in a suit and a bowler hat also waited. After an impatient minute the bowler hat said to the lolly pop man: "Oh hurry up, you pleb". The lolly pop man tipped his hat, apologized and immediately went on to the road to stop the traffic.

I stood dumbstruck at this little scene, equally enraged by the arrogance of the bowler hat and the obsequiousness of the lolly pop man. I think that incident more than any other instilled in me a visceral loathing of privilege. I knew such a thing would never happen in Australia.

In his biography of Rupert Murdoch, William Shawcross wrote that when they lived in London after Rupert bought *The Sun*, both he and Anna hated the British Establishment as they felt despised and frozen out. Anything that earns the undying hatred of Rupert Murdoch can't be all bad. Of course he got his own back by buying *The Times*.

I sat for the 11+ exam but didn't quite pass. Fortunately, borderline students were given an interview. When I was asked what I liked to read I was canny enough to say 'encyclopaedias'. So they sent me to Rutlish Boys Grammar School. Although I did not know him, another student who was there at the same time later become famous. It was John Major.

At Rutlish, before sitting down for school lunch we said grace in Latin. We were forbidden to take off our blazers no matter how warm it was. The only exception was when we played sport, which meant either rugby or fives. Soccer was for the working classes at the comprehensive schools. Our Latin teacher was what is known as a 'gerund grinder':

"Amo, amas, amat, amamus, amatis, amant" we chanted as if seeking enlightenment.

Unusually, the headmaster was not from the Home Counties, but from the north. One day, after some graffiti appeared, he called a special assembly and thundered: "I was disgusted and thoroughly mortified to see vulgarity on Rutlish school walls."

While at primary school I was treated as a novelty – the English teacher laughed at my funny accent. At grammar school I was just ignored. Because I was Australian, no-one took any notice of me. It was as if I simply didn't exist.

One day my father arrived home and said that he and my mother had been invited to have tea with the Queen at Buckingham Palace. We were all tremendously excited. When the big day came my father wore a top hat and tails, hired from Moss Bros, and my mother a long blue evening dress and we took photos of them in the garden. That night, as always, our ageing babysitter made us kids stand to attention when the television broadcast ended with the national anthem.

The next day we were deeply disappointed to learn that in fact 500 people had been invited to the reception and my parents didn't get within coo-ee of the Queen.

After two and a half years we returned to Canberra and I enrolled in first year at Telopea Park High School, a couple of hundred metres from here. Gough Whitlam spent a year at Telopea around 1930. It was during these years, still burning with the sense of injustice I had witnessed in the British class system, that I become politically radicalised, and by the age of 16 I was a firm republican.

The Queen was never far from our thoughts – not least because we sang about her every day. My parents were very proper, but also liberal-minded. One day, while stirring the white sauce, my mother was giving my sister a little talk about sex. At one point she said: "Everybody masturbates, even the Queen." It's an image better not dwelt upon.

I returned to Britain in 1979 and spent three years studying at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex. It was a campus with a reputation for radicalism, except that its radicalism was at least a decade in the past. Soon we learned that dashing Charles was to marry demure Diana. The outpouring of mawkish sentimentalism made me want to puke. There was no escaping the royal wedding in Britain so, as the day of the nuptials approached, my partner and I went to France. But when we woke in our tent by the Loire the caravans around us sprouted union jacks and TV aerials and a campground full of Poms spent the day glued to their screens.

But I did souvenir something from the mountains of Royal Wedding kitsch– a Chas and Di biscuit tin.

Later that year, I attended a conference of the British industrial left in Bradford. A bleaker industrial town I could not imagine. When a group of unionists learned I was Australian they tried to make me feel welcome by saying the names of all of the Australians they knew – Clive James, Rolf Harris, Dame Edna – icons of an Australia past, still trading off their dinkum Aussieness and daily reinforcing the patronizing view of Australians that the English love to have.

When I joined the queue in the canteen I found myself behind the only other Australian there, a radical feminist from Sydney. When she got to the counter she said in a loud voice: “A plough-persons lunch please”. The woman behind the counter (who resembled Ena Sharples from *Coronation Street*) said “You what?”. “A plough-persons’ lunch” she repeated, while I cringed.

Not long after, Princess Diana fell pregnant. If the royal wedding was mawkish, the endless coverage of the royal pregnancy was revolting. Black humour was the only means of striking back, so I formed a new student club, which I called SARF, the Society to Abort the Royal Foetus. The other foreign students at my institute thought it was funny, but when the secretaries found out I was nearly lynched. “That’s treason”, said one, and it was.

Soon after, Britain went to war with Argentina over the Falklands and British jingoism reached fever pitch. Oddly, it was the self-proclaimed Australian nationalist Rupert Murdoch whose newspapers stoked the fires of British nationalism more than any other. After a British submarine sank the rusting cruiser *General Belgrano*, and over 1000 young conscripts drowned in the icy waters of the Atlantic, *The Sun* ran its deathless headline “GOTCHA”. Mrs Thatcher emerged from Number 10 and said: “We must rejoice.”

When Germany was due to travel to England for a World Cup qualifier, I think it was *The Sun* that that declared: “The Germans think they can come over here and beat us at our national game. That’s alright, we’ve beaten them twice at theirs”.

Back in Australia, it was some years before I recovered from the trauma of royal over-exposure, but I soon learned to love the ever-more lurid soap opera of the Royal Family – the saponification of the Royal Family. I have to confess that I worry that if Australia

becomes a republic we might lose this endless source of entertainment. I want to know what happens next.

Is Harry really Charles' son or the fruit of Diana's furtive liaison with the caddish James Hewitt?

Is Harry destined to live out a dissolute life of drinking, womanizing and sponging off others, or will he break the royal mould?

How many more racist jokes does Phillip have stored away?

Will Camilla ever sit next to Charles on the throne?

Will William master Swahili?

And will we ever know whether Mohamed Al-Fayed is right, and the Royal Family did arrange the tragic death of Diana to prevent her marrying Dodi? Mind you, after watching Al-Fayed's performance on the *Ali G Show* a couple of years ago, who would blame the Royals for taking extreme measures to keep the Al-Fayeds out of the family? I read the other day that Al-Fayed has banned Prince Phillip from shopping at Harrods. That's one in the eye for the Windsors.

In 1993 Martin Kettle, a senior journalist from *The Guardian*, visited Australia. He was a friend of a friend and so we met for a chat in John Langmore's office in Parliament House. After a while he went to the Prime Minister's office as he had been half-promised an interview with Keating.

As he sat waiting, Keating walked by. A staffer indicated that a journalist from *The Guardian* would like to interview him. In a reference to the incident that saw the London tabloids dub Keating the Lizard of Oz, Keating said: "An English journalist, eh? The only time you people want to talk to me is when I twang the Queen's bra strap".

It was one of those lovely moments of Australian crudeness the cultural significance of which is lost on others, including Brits.

No interview ensued. Martin came back to John Langmore's office and, as if to check that he had really heard what he thought he heard, recounted the story to me. I said that it sounds like Keating. *The Guardian* duly reported Keating's comment – although curiously, Martin change the word 'twanged' to 'tweaked' – and the tabloids went into another paroxysm. Keating's office denied vehemently that he ever said such a thing. The journalist must have just made it up, they said.

When the Queen visited Australia in the year 2000 my son, who was 15 and captain of Lyneham High School, was invited to meet the Queen in the Great Hall at Parliament House. Senator Herron took him and another student under his wing and made sure they were well placed to meet the monarch. She walked passed and shook my son's hand. The lady in waiting followed closely and my son, in one of those spontaneous outbreaks of

teenage cheek, asked her what the Queen keeps in her handbag. She was stumped, but managed to say “Oh, you know, ladies things”.

But here I should make a confession. Although I love to mock the Royal Family, I am an Anglophile.

Living in England in the early 1980s, I developed a deep appreciation of the wit and sophistication of British politicians – perhaps because their erudition and disdain stands in such baleful contrast to the dullness our own breed. Although I didn’t much like his politics, I greatly admired Deputy Labour Leader Dennis Healey for the way he enriched public debate. Invective in the Australian Parliament rarely gets beyond insults such as ‘dingo’ and ‘arse-licker’, but cleverness is always more devastating. Healey once said this of David Owen, who had defected from Labour to join the Social Democratic Party.

Four fairies attended the birth of David Owen. Number one said “You’ll be good looking.” Number Two said “You’ll be clever.” Number three said “You’ll be very ambitious.” Number Four said “You’ll be all these things and you’ll also be a shit.”

Some might think this could be applied to Peter Costello.

Once in a television debate Healey decked the Chancellor of the Exchequer by calling him a ‘sado-monetarist’. Healy himself later became Chancellor of the Exchequer. After a particularly ineffectual budget-in-reply speech from Geoffrey Howe he said: “Well, that was like being mauled by a dead sheep”. It was like putting Daryl Williams up against Paul Keating.

Back in Australia around 1990, I used the sado-monetarism epithet in a radio debate over macroeconomic management with Des Moore. Moore had recently taken up a position with the IPA after resigning as Deputy Secretary of the Treasury. I also accused him of having an anal-retentive approach to inflation control, which left him speechless.

That reminds me of another Treasury story. When John Stone was Secretary of the Treasury, Treasury officers at one point went on strike over a wage claim, and junior officers picketed the building. One morning Mr Stone arrived at work and, passing the picketers on the steps, heard one say ‘Scab’. Furious, Stone came down the stairs, stood in front of the picketer and, unable to find the words, gasped ‘I’m speechless’. As he went back up the stairs, the picketer called after him ‘Inarticulate scab’.

While once a red-hot republican, today I am only luke-warm. I worry about whether becoming a republic will mean the severing of those last tenuous links to the sophistication of British culture, and especially literature and political discourse.

If the alternative were a confident emergent indigenous culture my concerns would be allayed. But I fear it may mean that we will be devoured all the more quickly by the maw of American commercial culture. The US-Australia Free Trade Agreement is another step in removing the remaining protections.

So I worry about the fate of the Australian identity. You may have seen a McDonald's TV advertisement that was screened around Anzac Day. An old digger is sitting in a McDonalds restaurant lost in reminiscences, evidently remembering lost comrades. A fresh-faced young woman in a McDonalds company uniform brings his order. The old digger, roused from his reverie, says 'Thank you'. The young woman looks meaningfully at him and says "No, thank you".

Here we have the most revered symbols of Australian identity looted by an American corporation in order to sell more hamburgers. The ANZAC legend of sacrifice and mateship has been turned into cheap sentimentality. The marketers have plundered every cultural icon they can, taking them away, transforming them into commercial messages and serving them back up to us.

Nothing is sacred anymore. When protestors wrote 'No War' in huge red letters on the sails of the Opera House, they were only doing what every marketer dreams they could do. For the marketers the Harbour Bridge and Uluru are no more than wasted signage opportunities.

I wonder whether Australians have a national identity any more; or whether the whole box and dice has been so corrupted by the values of the market that nothing real remains. In my view, the real culture war we should be having is one whose objective is to recapture our national identity from the marketers.

If an Australian republic were to mark the beginning of such a battle then I will be its most fervent advocate.

Thank you