

DAVID

TERROR ! INVASION ! DISORDER !

PANIC

DRUGS ! FEAR-MONGERS ! FLESH !

MARR

PANIC

A sudden and excessive feeling of alarm or fear, usually affecting a body of persons, originating in some real or supposed danger vaguely apprehended, and leading to extravagant or injudicious efforts to secure safety.—Oxford English Dictionary.

Australia is once again in a panic. This golden land, so intelligent and prosperous, so safe and orderly, is riven by fear of invasion not by the forces of a hostile power but a trickle of refugees arriving in fishing boats. Facts count for little in the face of these dark fears. Nor has experience done much to protect us from these passions. This is the fourth wave of such panic since the first refugee boats appeared in Darwin harbour in 1976. The pattern was set early but comes as a surprise every time: when the boats appear on the horizon the party in opposition puts the boot into the party in power. Governments totter. Hearts are hardened. When the panic is at its worst, both sides come together to inflict fresh cruelties.

Panic is so Australian. It's been with us from the start. Panic about the Chinese was the midwife of Federation. Ever since, a country that has so little to be afraid of has been swept by panic about Fenians, Wobblies, Hun saboteurs, Reds, queers, American comics, opiates, Jack Lang, dirty novels, films, television, demonstrations, AIDS, native title, the internet, bird flu, boatpeople, Muslims and terrorists. When panic arrives, facts lose their grip. The worst-case is the only scenario. All slopes are slippery. Action must be taken. No response is too irrational. And everyone except the victims has a high old time.

I was reporting the mad uproar over Bill Henson's pictures of naked children when it struck me that I've been reporting panics all my career: how they are whipped up, shape our lives and disappear, leaving nothing but wreckage behind. Perhaps I'm fascinated by panic because I'm gay. When I was growing up, preachers and police and politicians and the press were still beating up panics about people like me. It left me despising panic merchants, particularly those Tory fear-mongers who represent themselves as guardians of order. The politicians I have most admired in my life are those few who hold their nerve in the face of irrational fears let loose. I've come to see panic v. calm is as good a way of understanding the fundamentals of Australian politics as right v. left.

I was a kid journalist in 1975. My heart was with Whitlam even as I watched his government fall to pieces. His defeat sometime in 1977 was inevitable but his opponents wanted him out at once. To that end one of the great Australian panics was beaten up in parliament, in the press and the big end of town. By October 1975, conservative papers like the *Sydney Morning Herald* were unashamedly calling for the overthrow of the government: "It is in the plainest interest of national self-preservation to get rid of a management which has reduced a rich and fortunate country to the verge of economic and social disintegration." Tory fantasies of vice-regal power were everywhere promoted and in the midst of that hysteria Whitlam was dismissed by the Governor-General. So many lessons were there to be learnt about the politics of panic, not least how willing conservative politicians in this country are to toy with disorder. Whitlam's fall was overwhelmingly endorsed at the ballot box but who is left willing to defend 1975 now?

Panic is more than fear-mongering. Panic is the bonanza moment when fears ignite, when resistance becomes all but impossible in the face of a political firestorm. Turning fear into panic is a great art: knowing where to find the kindling, when to slosh on the kero, how to keep feeding the flames. But panic can't work unless a decent face is found to put on the dark passions being aroused.

Appearances count. Language matters. Great panic merchants find a way of suggesting, however vaguely, that the survival of the nation is at stake. Such desperate times require tough laws and strong leadership. In the end, panic is about power.

They are old bedfellows in Australia. One of the many pleasures of *The Wolf*, Richard Guilliat and Peter Hohnen's riveting story of a German raider's exploits in the First War, is their portrait of that great early panic merchant Billy Hughes spreading fear of the dastardly Hun for his own political purposes:

Thousands of Australians of German extraction were fired from their jobs and spied on by neighbours, and more than four thousand of them imprisoned in rural concentration camps, often on mere suspicion of disloyalty. More than two and a half thousand companies were identified as suspicious or shut down completely, and up to ten thousand letters a week were intercepted by the censor. The names of dozens of Australian towns – Bismarck, Blumberg, Heidelberg, Germanton – were changed to remove all traces of their origins as German immigrant communities. Even the Australian army general John Monash – later hailed as one of the most brilliant military tacticians of the First World War – was subject to hostility and rumour because his parents were German-speaking Poles.

As the *Wolf* began laying minefields along the Australian coast, Hughes deliberately ignored the evidence of a raider at work to renew his allegations against German saboteurs on land. Witch hunts and arrests intensified across the country. The newspapers backed Hughes to the hilt, screaming for the internment of anyone even remotely touched by a German connection. It was pure panic. Guilliat and Honen report laconically: "In the entire course of the First World War, not a single case of German espionage within Australia would be substantiated."¹

Even in peacetime, a willingness to throw the lever to panic corrupts Australian politics. We're a gullible country. The principles of liberty don't have much grip in public debate. Too often we succumb to campaigns for new powers of arrest, confiscation, banning

and jailing to meet the emergency *de jour*. Most of these ferocious laws fall into disuse once the panic dies down, but few are ever removed from the books. They remain in the statutes as the scar tissue of panics passed.

The courts in this country have a mixed record in the face of panic. When the mob is restless and the shock jocks are howling for revenge, judges are supposed to stay aloof, focus on the facts and be guided by principle alone. But judges aren't immune from irrational fears. The noise of the mob reaches the court room. The High Court gave its seal of approval to the mandatory detention of boatpeople after the second wave of boats arrived in the early 1990s. So there grew up in this country a parallel prison system for refugees, as often as not stuffed with children. Had the court brought calm to this issue then, governments of all stripes would be looking back now with profound gratitude. But the court folded and the camps in the desert are with us still.

Contrast the courage of the High Court in 1951 striking down Menzies' Communist Party Dissolution Act for its outrageous attempt to give ministers the power to seize and imprison on no basis other than their own opinions. What followed was the rare sight of the Labor Party standing up to the mob, defeating the referendum Menzies called to overturn the court's decision. Panic met its match.

The fall of the Berlin Wall was a low moment for panic-mongers worldwide. In Australia, Communism had been a great gift to panic, gusting through the politics of the country for over 80 years and keeping the right people in power for a long, long time. There was much to feed our fears in and after the Second World War when Communists had had a hand in espionage, treason and industrial mayhem. But by the 1980s the possibility of provoking fresh panic about the local dangers of Communism had long passed. The rule of this game is that panics can't be whipped up out of nothing: there has to be some danger somewhere, however remote, to keep panic alive. But once the wall came down, the Cold War warriors were left with no troops to command. Energetic attempts

in the Howard years to ignite a panic about the sinister agenda of the left – particularly “taxpayer-funded” lefties in the ABC, universities, museums – caused much angst among the commentators but failed to move the public. The Red Menace was utterly spent. Communism has let down even its detractors.

Race took its place. It’s the old perennial; the one that goes back to the beginning; the one that’s always there. The Mabo judgment sent a fresh wave of panic across Australia in 1992. Irrational fear of native title mixed with self-righteous rage. The second wave came in 1996 when the court decided native title was not automatically extinguished by pastoral leases. The Wik decision let loose wild fears and old hatreds, not only of blacks but the courts, lawyers and the left. Pauline Hanson and the new prime minister John Howard both surfed this panic. By the time it died, he was more firmly entrenched in power than ever and the red head from Ipswich was a spent force. When it came to playing the panic game, one was a professional and the other an amateur.

At stake in those years – and since – was the political loyalty of the most fearful Australians. Their fears have a place. They cannot be ignored in a democracy. But even as Australia becomes inexorably more progressive – as we become a more prosperous, better educated and more confident nation – the most fearful cohort of Australians has come to play an even more crucial role in our politics. In most of the elections in the last decade and a half – Kevin Rudd’s victory in 2007 being the exception – the mandate of the fearful has decided who governs this country. This collection of my work from those years concentrates on efforts to recruit this constituency by attempting to set panic running – panic over invasion by refugee boats; over the corrosive work of the Left; over lawless political demonstrators; over illicit drugs, over Muslim terrorists lurking in our midst; over photographers and the internet; and over the hidden dangers of charters of rights.

Not all these campaigns worked. But even failed attempts to whip up panic profoundly marked the politics of the time. Sometimes

Labor played an honourable role, refusing to be baited by the conservatives. This was not often. Labor mostly caved. These years also saw a civilised political shift across the political divide as old, old fears of homosexuality finally expired. Cardinals and imams do their best to keep this passion alive – it powers, for instance, their campaigns against a bill of rights – but the people don't believe them anymore. An Australia where panics can no longer be whipped up about poofs and reds is a different, better place.

Newspapers, radio and television are too often the friends of panic. There's an old definition of the purpose of the tabloid press: to maintain a perpetual state of false alarm. That's true enough in Australia. My years at *Media Watch* were largely spent puncturing those false alarms and becoming, in the process, enthralled by the great panic merchants of the media: Piers Akerman, young Andrew Bolt and the indestructible Alan Jones. In one of the safest, most peaceful countries on earth, they preach their message of violence and doom. They honour race fears. Most of the time they blame Labor and the shadowy forces of the Left for the catastrophes it seems Australia is facing. I asked Bob Carr recently if he'd ever heard the maxim that the purpose of the tabloid press is to persuade the working class to vote Tory. "I haven't," he replied. "But I think it is incontrovertible."

Jones was an old interest of mine. Watching that monster of rectitude in the witness box at the Cash for Comment Inquiry proved one of the most amusing assignments of my career. He couldn't for the life of him remember what was going through his head when he signed secret contracts worth millions to plug goods, services and political causes on 2UE. "I can't get into the mindset," he said, twisting his fingers to his brow as if performing in a serious game of charades. "I can't, I can't get into the mindset." Jones' followers did not desert him after this humiliation. He survived with ratings intact. Ditto his self-belief. Jones would go on to become one of the most ruthless panic-mongers of our time, his raging against Muslims defended by John Howard even in their violent aftermath.

Politicians who deal in panic wear out their welcome. The grubby business of terrifying the electorate over and over again takes its toll. In the end, people were a little sickened by Howard. He was the most professional politician I expect to see at work in my lifetime, and nothing was more professional than his manipulation of Australia's fears. Playing to anxiety is the default strategy of conservative politics in this country, but Howard took the finding and fanning of fear further than any prime minister since Billy Hughes. A decade of this left him shop-worn. So many scares had come and gone, failing to deliver on their bleak promises. His last days in office caught the pattern perfectly. Sydney was locked down for the great gathering of G8 leaders; crowds were corralled behind high wire fences; water canon were waiting for trouble; demonstrators were arrested in droves - and the Chaser team wearing Arab dress in a car flying the Canadian flag was waved by police through the security checks along Macquarie Street. Australia laughed all the way to the polls.

I used to argue that panics can't be run from opposition. The boats and Tony Abbott proved me wrong. He became leader of the opposition in the last weeks of 2009, the year the boats reappeared. Labor was floundering. Christmas Island was bursting. Abbott looked down the barrel of the cameras and with a look of pained sincerity delivered his brutally effective mantra: "Stop the boats." So he continued month after month, and as the numbers of refugees turning up at the island in wretched fishing boats rose from hundreds to thousands, a fresh wave of panic swept Australia. Once again, the politics of a fine, secure country is hostage to fears that go deep into our imagination and way back into our history. Panic takes us into the dark.

1. *The Wolf, How One German Raider Terrorised Australian and the Southern Oceans in the First World War*, William Heinemann, Australia, 2009, p.124.



DAVID MARR is the multi-award winning author of *Patrick White: A Life* and *The High Price of Heaven*, and co-author with Marian Wilkinson of *Dark Victory*. In a career spanning over thirty years, he has written for the *Bulletin* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, been editor of the *National Times*, a reporter for *Four Corners* and presenter of ABC-TV's *Media Watch*. In 2007 he authored the Quarterly Essay *His Master's Voice*.

Panic (noun). A sudden uncontrollable fear or anxiety, often causing wildly unthinking behaviour.

Australians see themselves as a relaxed and tolerant bunch. But scratch the surface and you'll uncover an extraordinary level of panic – about politics, art, sexuality, drugs, boat people, protest, religion and terror. Through it all, David Marr has stood tall to question the hubris, ignorance and deception that lie behind the frenzies whipped up by politicians, shock jocks, church leaders and others.

This essential collection of Marr's reportage and analysis shows how hysteria can engulf a nation. Bill Henson's photography of naked children ignites a war on culture, while the lonely outcrop of Christmas Island is the only way to assuage fears of invasion by asylum seekers. From the vigorous policing of civil protestors to public support for executing drug traffickers, and from Alan Jones's backing of the Cronulla riots to Mohammed Haneef's lengthy detention as a terror suspect, Marr exposes the real, often hidden agenda of the fear-mongers.

Featuring Marr's trademark insight and quick wit, and his brilliant prose, *Panic* cuts through the froth and fury that have kept Australia simmering for the last fifteen years.

Please note, this is an uncorrected proof.

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