

‘Good evening and welcome to *QED*,’ Roger began with great verve. ‘Tonight, two controversial issues that are currently a headache for the government – education and the environment.’ And so commenced the discussion.

Although Grafton found *QED* tedious to watch, he discovered that being on the show was like being on runaway train. Every time you formulated something to say on a topic, the discussion moved onto something else. Roger turned to Grafton early in the piece to explain the aims of the T.E.R.R.O.R. commission. Grafton answered with a short speech that it was about maintaining quality in Australian tertiary education while keeping it affordable. This was responded to by the red-dress woman who was apparently some sort of comedian.

‘Sounds great to me,’ she drawled sarcastically. ‘There’s nothing I like better than a whole bunch of middle-aged middle-class white men sitting around talking to a lot of other middle-aged middle-class white men about how to teach a lot of crap made up by dead middle-class white men.’

There was appreciative laughter and the audience applauded furiously. Roger threw to Grafton for a reply. This was the moment Grafton had been waiting for, his chance to lambast the lame-brained thinking, the stultifying pall of cultural relativism and inane theories that post-modern Marxist thinking had imposed on the academic world – this was his moment to re-state and re-affirm the aims of the Enlightenment now under attack by organised Philistinism and medieval superstition.

But he didn’t.

With all the eyes of the panel and the audience on him, something odd happened to Grafton. To his astonishment, his mouth which, unknown to him, apparently had a mind of its own and much better survival skills, started to say something completely different. Before he knew it, he was delivering a spiel comprising the sort of anodyne waffle he had become used to hearing as an academic.

‘Well, it might surprise you but I completely agree. I have to make it clear that one of the primary remits of the Review is a broadening of cultural diversity and sensitivity in the tertiary sector. We regard it as

non-negotiable that universities and TAFE's become not only racially, culturally and both gender and ability neutral, but that all education programs be inclusive, environmentally sustainable, positively discriminating and tectonically stable.'

This actually drew scattered applause. Grafton exhaled with relief. It turned out that all those years of wading through university mission statements had not been wasted. In fact, the last words of his speech had been a stroke of brilliance, because Roger Smith, always on the lookout for a segue, immediately fastened on them and moved onto the topic of Tectonic Change. This allowed Grafton to relax and recover while the studded playwright reddened and shook his head and declared he was 'ashamed of being Australian' because the government was doing so little to stop Crustal Sliding. He was loftily supported in this by Liz Rowntree, the regal actress who pronounced in Shakespearian tones that Australia only had a couple of years to implement a Tectonic Change plan before millions died.

The shadow minister beside Grafton had little to say except that he supported the work of the Tectonic Change Commission and that the Workers' Party would implement any recommendations arising from it, unlike the government for whom it was clearly just a public relations exercise. Roger then threw the discussion over to the audience. The lights came up to reveal an audience bristling with beards.

One young man in the front row shot up his hand. Roger nominated him and he read from a prepared question. 'Neither the Government nor the Opposition have announced any plans to deal with the advent of a zombie apocalypse. Could the senator and the shadow minister explain this?'

Roger looked towards Grafton, whose brain had gone into lock-down. Luckily, the shadow minister jumped in.

'I'd like to answer that, Roger,' he said. 'Unlike the Government, the Opposition takes the threat of a zombie apocalypse seriously. This is another example of the government burying its head in the sand. We have already declared that we are prepared to allocate funds both for research into both cures and vaccines to prevent zombieism, early zombie-detection procedures and rebates for citizens to put steel

shutters on their windows.’

Grafton realised that his major shortcoming as both a politician and a social commentator was that he did not watch enough Hollywood movies which were apparently the main source of scientific information these days. He was dreading being asked to add his comment to the issue as he had no ready repository of rubric to draw on regarding this topic, but luckily the discussion diverged into a debate about the pejorative nature of the word ‘zombie’, which some people felt discriminated against the undead and should be replaced by the term ‘differently enlivened’. The program finished with perfunctory thanks, a few nodded goodbyes, and everyone being released on their own recognisance.

As he rode home, Grafton observed that the idea of ‘the power of the media’ was not properly understood. That power was commonly seen as the ability of media magnates to impose their political will on entire media organisations.

In truth, that power was located at a much lower, quotidian level – like hospital patients who were, on admission, stripped of both autonomy and clothing, wheeled around half-naked on gurneys, left waiting in corridors, able to eat and drink only as permitted, and poked, prodded and penetrated with needles at will. Those who consented to an interview for press, radio or television were essentially helpless. Just as the patient had no control over what happened in the operating theatre, the interviewee had no control over the course of the interview which was determined solely by the questions on the interviewer’s clipboard, questions which were invariably so ill-informed, irrelevant and captious as to not only deny the interviewee any chance of saying what they had intended, but even bamboozle them into saying the exact opposite.

Of course, the procedures in hospitals were ultimately for the benefit of the patient. By contrast, the sole beneficiary of the interview was the media organisation. Current affairs programs were simply a form of entertainment in which the presenters, moderators and reporters were the stars and public figures raw materials. Politicians, actors and other celebrities might kid themselves that it was a mutually

beneficial arrangement, but the truth was they were just fodder: they had no more control over the final product than a pine log being fed into a wood chipper.

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