

# HOLDING UP THE MIRROR: WINDSCHUTTLE, ME, AND THE PROVOCATEUR ON TRIAL

KATHERINE WILSON

**A**t school I had an English teacher called Mr Doyle. Many years later I saw him on telly, leading the Victorian Liberal Party to its worst-ever defeat. Poor Mr Doyle. But Mr Doyle soon re-emerged from history's dustbin, and now serves as the much maligned mayor of Melbourne. 'You're an idiot, Doyle,' wrote loudmouth columnist Catherine Deveny in the *Age*. A man 'with ambition, but no talent . . . 100% charisma-free, idea-resistant and void of all traces of originality'.

Yet as my teacher, Mr Doyle wasn't the pompous, slack-jawed tosser Victorians voted against. Or thought they did. He was a corker; a spunky, charismatic idealist who infected his students with passion.

Or something more erotic than passion. Which isn't to suggest the girls were hot for him in *that* way, though some may have been (he later married one of his former students). But in Mr Doyle's classroom, there was a certain eros—that exquisite intimacy described by the American literary scholar William Deresiewicz as a 'kind of erotic intensity between student and professor'. This intensity 'begins with the intellect, that suspect faculty, and it involves a form of love that is neither erotic nor familial, the only two our culture understands. Eros in the true sense is at the heart of the pedagogical relationship . . .'

Many of us enjoyed group brain-sex with the splendid Mr Doyle—but it was his humanity, his kindness, that sealed my love for him. This spilled from his literary insights to his gentle respect for students' perspectives. In me, he seemed to recognise

the suburban misfit, ill-at-ease at an elite girls school that was way beyond her parents' socioeconomic reach.

And it was Mr Doyle who first aroused in our class an appreciation of literature's 'show, don't tell' principle. I pondered this many years later, when he said something unthoughtful in public. At the time, I was among those campaigning against the Howard government's courting of Monsanto—a company that us courts had found guilty of negligence, trespass, nuisance and suppression of the truth, among other crimes. For its environmental damage, including poisoning of rivers, Monsanto is one of the very few companies found guilty, under Alabama law, of 'outrage'—a conduct 'so outrageous in character and extreme in degree as to go beyond all possible bounds of decency so as to be regarded as atrocious and utterly intolerable in civilized society'.

When Mr Doyle made his silly statement, the Howard government had just permitted Monsanto's GM Roundup Ready™ canola to be grown commercially in Australia. Engineered to be resistant to Monsanto's Roundup™ herbicide, the GM canola allowed farmers to saturate their crops with chemical herbicides without killing their produce. A squad of politicians, sympathetic think-tanks and columnists spun this as a victory for 'science'—despite dissent from agronomists and health and environmental scientists. Incredibly, journalists swallowed this line—as if this biotechnology product, owned and licensed under punitive contracts by an overseas multinational, was any more 'science' than nuclear weapons or solariums are 'science'. (As I write, the ABC reports that the GM canola is a dud, with yields 17 per cent lower than regular canola.)

But my lovely, insightful English teacher never got these distinctions. Questioned about lifting bans on GM foods that most surveyed Australians—rural and urban—don't want, he told the ABC: 'My answer to these things is: go with the science. It's as simple as that. It might not be popular with a few inner city greenies, but if the science tells you [to] proceed [with GM food crops] then have the courage to believe in the science and the advice of the science.'

Whatever happened to you, Mr Doyle?

Soon after he became mayor, a friend and I, being among those 'few inner city greenies', began cooking up some mischief. We thought we'd demonstrate to Mr Doyle *our* version of 'show, don't tell'. My friend, a plant scientist, agreed to claim her company had patented a method of splicing palm trees with jellyfish genes so they were luminous. (This may not be as ludicrous as it sounds. Many organisms have been spliced with jellyfish fluorescence genes for good scientific reason: to answer research questions, for example, about the inner workings of cells. 'Bioluminescence' has particularly interesting applications for cancer research.) She agreed to paint seedlings with luminous paint, and approach Mayor Doyle about the potential to save power by planting Melbourne's boulevards with GM palms that 'naturally' shed

light. We thought we'd ask Mayor Doyle to launch the pilot project and trial it along Swanston Street.

The ruse hadn't really progressed beyond late-night talk, when I got an email from Keith Windschuttle. He, the tireless culture warrior who now edits the radical-right journal *Quadrant*, had written to accept a science essay I'd submitted. Among his other adventures, Windschuttle has made a hobby of condemning constructivist approaches to science and journalism. So posing as 'Sharon Gould', a Brisbane-based biotechnologist, I'd concocted an experiment to see whether he'd measure up to his 'realist' approach to truth (the rationale can be found online in *Diary of a Hoax*). 'Gould' submitted an essay that journalist Margaret Simons would later report as being 'studded with false science, logical leaps, outrageous claims and a mixture of genuine and bogus footnotes'.

Incredibly, Windschuttle's acceptance of the essay, for the January–February 2009 issue of *Quadrant*, would soon dominate the front pages of every broadsheet in the nation. Poor Mr Windschuttle, who'd condemned academics for sloppy footnotes, had failed to make even the most elementary check of Gould's putative credentials. Even the webpage I'd devised for her and sent him hadn't received one hit, and *Quadrant* had overlooked the outrageous claims and logical flaws in the essay. I like to think Windschuttle's reckless editing rescued Mayor Doyle from my mischief. Who knows.

An obvious choice to break the story of the hoax was Margaret Simons, who has had her own adventures with culture warriors. Simons doesn't share my approach to writing, but is in many ways my latter-day Mr Doyle. She's quick-witted, kind and has a formidable intellect. I'd gotten to know her years ago, when I asked her to supervise my thesis on the blurred edges between advocacy and journalism. In Australia, advocacy and journalism mix like oil and water. Few media here publish in the French tradition of *journalisme engagé*, or the American tradition of 'advocacy journalism', which is evidence-based but sets out to promote a specific viewpoint. With some notable exceptions, it's not a style embraced in Australia—because, depending how you look at it, 'advocacy journalism' is either an oxymoron or a redundant phrase. It raises sticky questions about bias and balance.

Which is partly why a hoax seemed a fitting vehicle for my concerns. As an activist, or an advocate, I was troubled by the twin notions of 'objectivity' and 'balance' as they're understood by some, because they can favour (already overrepresented) official truths and further marginalise already marginalised voices. They can normalise some positions at the expense of others, and they can erroneously imply a middle-ground of truth. They can enact political agendas simply by reporting them. Two obvious science examples are the intelligent design and climate change 'debates', in

which—some media gave equal time to unequally substantiated claims.

I don't want to get all Garner about this, but by the time I approached Simons I was almost broken with grief. Loved ones and life plans were slipping away from me. In the scheme of things, as Israel struck Palestine and other mothers lost their husbands and children and homes and hopes, my woes amounted to not that much, but with a life-force multiplying in my womb and its attendant hormones surging through me, my anguish was keen.

It was in this state that email correspondence with Windschuttle started. Which isn't for a moment to suggest that I wouldn't have proceeded with the hoax exactly the same way if things were just dandy. But my rawness did arouse in me vexed questions as my sense of humour and cosmic justice gave way to something earnest and existential. While I remain confident that the hoax was entirely fair and ethically justifiable in a broad political sense, the *personal* ethics of it—the 'nitty gritty', as Windschuttle would call it—troubled me. Windschuttle, in his emails, was so perfectly nice, and in my own vulnerability, on a human level, I had mixed feelings playing Sharon Gould.

Simons would soon learn of this. The circles she and I mix in occasionally intersect at the edges, and we found ourselves at the same Christmas party. There, I told her about a prank I'd pulled off, having, to quote Ern Malley, *despaired of ever making my obsessions intelligible*.

Eyebrows raised, she gave me one of her stern half-smiles. But, dammit, I couldn't read her facial expression when I explained the 'nitty-gritty' of my experiment. At one stage she held her head right down as she listened intently. *Right* down. Was she muffling a chuckle? She asked me careful questions, and said calmly that she would like the story. I suspected she was chomping at the bit for it, but she remained poker-faced, neither praising nor criticising my project.

We met for coffee. We had several phone conversations. We discussed for the umpteenth time that undergraduate question: where journalism's first responsibility lies. Is it with the reader, the story, the medium, the proprietor, the source, the sense of justice? Simons told me that because of my life circumstance, and because I was due to give birth, she considered me a vulnerable source for whom she had primary responsibility. It would be different if I were, say, a powerful public figure, like Windschuttle, or a PR flack.

So what of Windschuttle's state, and why do I detail all this? In part because of an unintended (but, in hindsight, predictable) fallout from this hoax, and a most telling portrait of the shape of public debate in this country. In a stark exemplar of shooting the messenger, some terrifically nasty accusations have flown around about Simons' role and motives in reporting this hoax, in protecting my identity, and in warding off the media from my doorstep. Some of the mud-slinging comes from Camp Quadrant (or

Kamp Krusty, as I've come to call it), some from sympathetic think-tanks, some just rabid commentators on blogs.

But perhaps these indicate Windschuttle's own vulnerability. The day Simons told me *Quadrant* was out, I high-tailed it to Readings bookshop with my little boy, but couldn't find a copy. Dang. I could hardly request it. See, I know some of the good folk at Readings, and I couldn't be seen buying an issue of that 'tainted masthead', as Guy Rundle has called it. So I did something almost as disgraceful: I legged it over the road to Borders, where no-one knows me. There was a stack of *Quadrants*, with the hoax article proudly flagged on the cover. Oh, Christ. By the time Simons broke the news to Windschuttle, I was having contractions, but the knowledge that I'd given another human a very shitty time of it seemed to strip away that transcendental grace—or at least oxytocin hormones—necessary for childbirth.

As the news hit the front pages, the Earth warmed, and mothers still mourned their children dying in Gaza, people were caught in wretched Gitmo negotiations, but these didn't lead the day's news. The real news was eclipsed by the hoax. With parliament not yet sitting and a lull in the cricket season, the prank became blood-sport. By the time my identity was outed (front pages again!), contractions had stopped.

It's a wonderful thing to have a public voice, but it's a shitty thing being the object of media predation. I don't know if that's how Windschuttle feels, but to me, this kind of attention can make you self-absorbed to the point of narcissism; it can make you forget the important things, like feeding your little boy's Sea Monkey larvae (they died, he cried) and the life-force inside you.

Contractions started and stopped, and I pondered the world views of those *Quadrant* geezers. Once, Malcolm Fraser's biographer, Philip Ayres, published a memoir in *Quadrant* that was astoundingly sexist and deeply insensitive to anyone with a Jewish background. Shame on Windschuttle for publishing it. I served it hot to Ayres in *Crikey*, but afterwards I hoped he never read or heard of it, because a friend told me she'd served on a board with Ayres, and that he was lovely, an old-school gentleman.

Decent people can say erroneous things in public forums. There are times I have, and in the age of online, you can't bury your mistakes. Still, when I turned these personal questions into political ones, I regained footing on sure ground. In a broad, utilitarian sense, *of course* it's fair to lampoon these tireless culture warriors and guns-for-hire. Just as Alan Jones, with a smaller audience than the ABC's *Gardening Australia*, wields power over politicians, so some powerful think-tanks and forums such as *Quadrant* achieve disproportionate exposure. Their work is republished nationally, their smoke-and-mirror campaigns, taken very seriously by some in politics, have trickle-down effects. I can't put it more clearly than Mark Davis once did in *Overland*: 'Thousands of people have attended the ABC rallies, attracting relatively little media coverage. Fewer than forty

people, including speakers, attended a recent IPA-sponsored anti-ABC conference, but the event generated coverage in almost every Australian newspaper.<sup>1</sup>

Yet it's a dirty business taking the piss. It's dirtier still to report it. Simons had the courage to break the news to Windschuttle. Once you call yourself a journalist, there's another layer of responsibility altogether.

In my own tortured attempts at journalism, this has been driven home. Once, *Crikey* published a report I'd written about Helen Dale, nee Darville, aka Demidenko. She now blogs as 'skepticlawyer'. I reported her new incarnation as a blogger, and was astounded to see my report characterised as a 'smear' on a free market blogsite to which she then contributed. *Smear*? How so? It was the truth. Dale was indeed the 1995 Ukrainian-costumed author who claimed Jews killed her grandfather. Her novel *The Hand that Signed the Paper* was indeed condemned as anti-Semitic, and indeed was subject to plagiarism allegations. Dale indeed enjoyed a short-lived career as a *Courier-Mail* columnist before her second column was found to be plagiarised. And so on.

But while I have no sympathy for Dale's politics, nor her apparent recent attempts to reframe her fraud by aligning herself with me as a fellow hoaxer (a revisionist strategy she once used in a *Quadrant* article), I now have some sympathy for the charge of smearer. And empathy for Dale herself, who's now carving a respectable legal career. Why? Because my report—and so many others like mine—gave her no space to move on, no room for the possibility of redemption.

This is but one reason why Windschuttle, believe his views or not, seems to me a first-class smearer deserving of a prank. He has filled boundless newsprint and airtime accusing the authors of a few errant footnotes of serious offences (not to mention vicious smears of indigenous culture)—and he's given no room for other possibilities. Such ferocious certitude in the face of evidence to the contrary is the hallmark of an ideologue. Simons has told me that should the hoax have been directed at *Overland* or the *Age*, she would have reported it. But it would hardly be newsworthy, hardly a hoax worthy of anything, because the editors of those publications haven't spent their careers launching vicious petards by which they could be hoist.

Hoaxes confuse people. When US culture-jammer Joey Skaggs duped the us media into reporting that he'd set up a Cighthouse for Dogs (a brothel for Manhattan pooches), he then exposed it as a hoax. Yet Radio WABC did not retract the news report (which was nominated for an Emmy award), nor did it hold the looking-glass to itself, nor did it consider the social commentary Skaggs was attempting. Instead, it accused Skaggs of claiming the story was a hoax to avoid prosecution. Similarly, Skaggs' many other media pranks—including Celebrity Sperm Bank, Cockroach Vitamin Pill, Sex Tapes Saved Marriage, and Dog Meat Soup—attracted widespread coverage. Yet once exposed as hoaxes, they attracted scorn and lawsuits, but little media reflection on why

these stories seemed plausible, worthy of reportage, and a comment on society.

As cultural commentary, hoaxes are as telling as the reactions they spawn. Picture that gorgeous photo reproduced in Michael Hayward's *The Ern Malley Affair*, where Max Harris hams it up with caricatures of Ern and Ethel Malley. Harris was wounded, yes, but in the end hardly took himself too seriously. By contrast, picture Team Quadrant and its fellow travellers launching into damage control, picking through the hoax article as if surveying a crime scene, ignoring crucial evidence and inconvenient truths—as if through footnotes and trickery alone I've sought some kind of contemptible Trojan-horse entrapment. They cannot see the picture for their reductionism. They have shifted the blame to *Crikey*, to Simons, to David Marr (whom they compared with Hitler), to *Monthly* editor Sally Warhaft, and to that nebulous dark force they call The Left. I feel sorry they take themselves so seriously, sorry that they can't hold a mirror to themselves.

What did the *Quadrant* hoax prove? Just as the famous Sokal hoax didn't prove that constructivist critiques of science were wrong, nor did the *Quadrant* hoax prove that realist approaches are wrong. What each did, in my opinion, was expose ideologue editors who dished it out but couldn't take it. Each also sparked public attention and debate: the primary purpose of culturejamming, a practice in which media techniques are used to hold a mirror to media and society.

Why was the Gould hoax article plausible; why does it *still* make sense to Camp Quadrant, but was laughable to those who got the joke? The Sokal hoax article, read through sociology goggles, seems plausible (if turgid and overwrought); just as the Gould article, read through realist goggles, seems plausible—though non-sociologists such as Simons and Rundle, with their whipstroke wits, spotted the logical flaws immediately. (As I write, Simons reports that Edith Cowan University academic Kayt Davies has an essay in *Quadrant* arguing that the hoax article has 'reasonable logical integrity'.)

Science sociologists are interested in these questions. They're interested in the relationships between science and society and language and mass media. They're interested in how culture constructs the idea of scientific 'truth'. Most I've read are not, as Windschuttle's writings suggest, mired in a postmodern fug, disappearing up their own arseholes. Instead, these scholars scrutinise, for example, how concepts such as 'scientific consensus' and 'weight of evidence' are politicised and institutionalised, and often shifting.

Arguing that scientific 'consensus' and 'weight of evidence' are politicised is how some of *Quadrant's* climate change sceptics employ the very constructivist techniques that Windschuttle has derided. As the journalism academic and science journalist Anna Salleh points out, deconstruction of climate change science by sceptics presents a complex challenge for journalists and science studies scholars. Salleh

believes journalists' capacity to respond 'in a socially useful way to this challenge is limited by their tendency to represent science as a value-free activity. Science is presented as being the arbiter of what are essentially social and political questions, such as how society should respond to the threat of climate change.'

Salleh's PhD thesis revealed, among other things, the ways many Australian journalists see 'science' as the gospel truth (Robert Doyle's 'believe in the science'), rather than an intellectual endeavour that can discover, innovate and guide us towards informed decisions, but can also be shifting, contested, politicised.

Scientific innovation should—contrary to the hoax essay's ludicrous argument—be rigorously scrutinised using Fourth Estate principles. My own preliminary PhD research suggests that in general the public respects 'science' and is also generally comfortable wading through contested and complex claims. More importantly, the public overwhelmingly supports science's age-old Precautionary Principle. This principle holds that where there is scientific uncertainty, and a significant possibility of serious or irreversible harm, decision-makers are obliged to take protective measures.

This is a *conservative* position—in both the literal and Old Right sense. It is not a 'leftist' position, despite the tribal accusations flying from Camp Quadrant. Traditional conservatives, according to Noel O'Sullivan in his 1976 classic *Conservatism*, are 'committed to the idea of limits' and 'make the best of things with more modest policies of compromise and accommodation'. The true conservative, then, is comfortable with the public's desire to adopt the Precautionary Principle with climate change, with GM foods, with wireless technologies, nanotechnologies and any scientific innovation. (As Salleh points out, this principle, contrary to what its detractors claim, need not invoke a passive 'failure to act', but an active 'decision to act in an alternative way'.) The true conservative would heed the epic body of evidence about human impact on global warming, and take palliative care, even if there is dissent from a small band of fossil-fuel-funded scientists and also from a few independent scientists who've arrived at their positions through earnest endeavour.

And the true conservative would also, on the other hand, consider the over-subsidised GM food crop industry and the evidence put forward by under-funded dissident health and environmental scientists, whose alarming findings are not, for political reasons, replicated (experiments are rarely if ever repeated), and so can hardly amass to form 'weight of evidence'. Again, a true conservative would take palliative care and demand repeated and more rigorous testing—*more* science, not less—before allowing radical, unwanted and under-regulated biotechnology products to become part of our food chain. (I am not, by the way, an 'extremist' 'anti-GM warrior', as the *Australian* branded me when outing me as the hoaxer. I depart from some fellow

activists in that I think there's a place for GM in medical and pure-science research.)

The *Quadrant* hoax 'worked', in terms of media impact, but criticisms of it, as they have been relayed to me by Camp Gould, run something like this: the hoax article was badly argued (well, *der!* Then *Quadrant* shouldn't have published). The article used some real facts and evidence (so do all hoaxes: so did the Sokal hoax once championed by Windschuttle, including its footnotes). The article was mostly true (even if this were the case, so was the Sokal article, and so was the war the Ern Malley poems described). *Quadrant* is not a science magazine (then why does it publish 'science' articles without checking?). *Quadrant* is not peer-reviewed, and small journals don't have the resources to check facts (as Rundle has argued, the most elementary work of an editor would have spotted the glaring hoax; and small journals *do* outsource review for specialist articles). The hoax has rescued *Quadrant* from obscurity (how obscure is a journal whose campaigns are writ large in our only national broadsheet?). The hoax was irrelevant because *Quadrant* doesn't publish stuff about GM (yes, it does). The hoaxer should have written the article about global warming (go do your own goddam hoax). If the hoaxer wanted to show up Windschuttle, she should have written an article arguing straight with him (yeah, right. *That'll* show 'em. *That'll* have an impact relative to Windschuttle's media exposure).

But the best criticism was made by Tim Lambert, who runs the excellent science blog *Deltoid*. Lambert's central criticism, as I understand it, was that if, as Windschuttle claims, the hoax article is 'only' 10-15 per cent false (and I dispute this, Mr Speaker), that's not as inaccurate as most *Quadrant* pseudoscience essays.

Even Jonathan Green, who edits *Crikey*, seemed puzzled, telling the *Age* that the hoaxer has made 'a difficult place for herself as a journalist'. Yet the hoaxer didn't act as a journalist; nor did the hoax article pose as journalism. Nor was it accepted as journalism. Nor does *Quadrant* publish journalism—despite Windschuttle's attempts to spin it as 'fraudulent journalism' (he accepted it as a science essay). The 'fraudulent' bit I'll proudly wear, but it ain't journalism. It's a *hoax*.

There's dark artifice involved in any piece of writing and agenda-setting, 'truthful' or otherwise. Which is why my attempts at journalism have been tortured, and give me constant despair. I don't know if I have the intellectual and emotional fortitude it takes to be a journo, at least outside the *journalisme engagé* tradition. For me, a hoax is easier, more playful and more erotic. It's more literary and revealing; as a spectacle it is more able to speak truth to power. Why? Because it employs, in the purest sense, literature's 'show, don't tell' principle, first aroused in me by the erotic Mr Doyle. The Windschuttle hoax didn't *tell* folks anything, as journalism does, but I'm still holding out hope that it—and the reactions it spawned—*showed* them plenty.