

Left wondering at who shouts the loudest

By Andrew Bolt

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I had no idea that for 11 years I'd managed to drown out all debate in Australia. Only now does senior *Age* writer Russell Skelton dare blow the whistle.

And, boy, am I embarrassed. Or maybe I'm red just from laughing so hard at the stupidity of the Left, once more confusing its right to speak with its demand we all agree.

It was last month's ideas summit that proved to Skelton that Kevin Rudd's Labor had brought the dawn of debate. "For one weekend a national conversation took place about the future of the country without a bunch of once-influential marsupials shouting down discussion of significant policy issues. These are the possums of the conservative commentariat."

Or, as the summit chairman, Rudd mate Prof Glyn Davis, more gently put it, here at last was "a chance to have a national conversation".

Two things about this fancy are bizarre. First, how did Skelton get the idea we'd had no debate, or "national conversation", under John Howard?

Were our writers festivals really just one bawl of conservatives? Were the ideas festivals of Brisbane and Adelaide really just parades of conservative screechers? Did the ABC broadcast only conservatives, too?

Did the premiers' literary prizes stop going to a chain-letter of Leftists? Did the Film Finance Commission stop funding films such as *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and *The Tracker*?

Did TV stations scrap all their specials on global warming? Did the Melbourne Comedy Festival stop all its comedians from mocking Howard?

Did our wall-to-wall Labor state governments sack themselves? Did the "stolen generations" promoters steal away? Did all the Left-wing magazines - *Dissent*, *Overland*, *Arena*, *Meanjin*, *The Monthly* and *Eureka Street* - close their books?

And were Robert Manne, David Marr, Julian Burnside, Phillip Adams, Tim Flannery and Bob Brown driven underground, never to be heard from under Howard's Fourth Reich?

What a mad idea, to think all those conversations were "shouted down". What makes it madder is that Skelton knows intimately that the Left, far from having been drowned out, did all the drowning work itself.

After all, he works for a paper that two years ago drove out the last conservative opinion writer on its staff. What's more, his impeccably Left-leaning wife, Virginia Trioli, thrived at the ABC during the Howard years, not only hosting a radio show, an arts program and now *Lateline*, but often joining a panel of Leftists on the ABC's *Insiders* to shout down the lone token conservative. Usually me, actually.

Other Age writers admit what Skelton denies. Last month Catherine Deveny, also a fill-in ABC host, sighed: "Man, we loved to hate Howard. Back in the good old days of 2007 it was wall-to-wall leftie love-ins of hatred."

Sure was, but the Left's latest new theory is that our intelligentsia barely dared squeak under Howard's tyranny.

Here's David Marr, a Skelton colleague at Fairfax: "Howard . . . cowed his critics, muffled the press, intimidated the ABC, gagged scientists, silenced non-government organisations, neutered Canberra's mandarins, curtailed parliamentary scrutiny, censored the arts, banned books, criminalised protest and prosecuted whistleblowers."

Whew. But Skelton fingers other villains, which brings me to his second inanity. Which conservatives does he blame for all this "shouting down"?

Says he: "They make their nests within the pages of Quadrant magazine (an obscure journal with a circulation that is a fraction of the K mart catalogue), and invade the columns of News Ltd papers and the hollowed-out walls of Right-wing think tanks."

Hmm. Can he be right? After all, he admits Quadrant is in fact an "obscure journal" with a tiny circulation. Something so puny doesn't have the lungs to shout down even a Skelton.

Well, the Right-wing think tanks then. Were they responsible?

But the truth is a Left-wing think tank, the Australia Institute, has had far more luck getting the media to run its lines than has the IPA, the sole outfit Skelton could refer to.

He couldn't mean the only other contender, the CIS, which had a couple of representatives at Kevin Rudd's summit who were so typically well-behaved that Skelton concedes no shouting down was done there at all.

But I can't think of any debate the IPA has ever drowned out. Can you?

So that leaves the "columns of News Limited papers", which alone must have shouted down all that debate. But which columnists does Skelton, too timid to name names, mean?

Check our roster. Phillip Adams, Jill Singer, Eddie McGuire, Corinne Grant, Paul Syvret, Terry Sweetman, Des Houghton, Greg Barns, Tim Dunlop - all of the Left, so surely none of them talked over Skelton's debates.

But, silly me. I forgot two other News columnists. The Daily Telegraph's Piers Akerman and . . . me. In fact, I know Skelton means me because he quotes me calling the ideas summit "Nimbin in suits". Oh, and he refers to the Australian's reporter on NSW politics. That's it.

But let's be fair, and add to his list the Australian's Janet Albrechtsen. So this great drowning out of national debate was done by just three of us, and a NSW sidekick.

I'm so vain that I'd like to believe it, but we all know Skelton either suffers from paranoia or is apoplectic at being contradicted. Indeed, I suspect what's really bugging him is not that two or three conservative columnists shut down all debates, but that they haven't been shut up themselves.

Why haven't we gone in the "cleansing" that ABC host Jon Faine mooted, on the grounds that my sort "represents the thinking that's out of step with the result of the election"?

So no wonder Skelton was thrilled by the summit. Its guest list was so "cleansed" that just one in a 100 of the summitters polled was against a republic, and 118 were members of just one Left-wing group, GetUp.

Yet on Skelton waffles, somehow managing to criticise the real debates under Howard and praise the stifled ones at the summit: "For the first time in a generation . . . a conversation was held without a prime minister and coterie of pompous finger-pointers telling us that they, and only they, knew what is best for this country."

Actually, Russell, far from this being the first free chat on these topics, Howard held a referendum in 1999 on the summit's biggest "new" idea - a republic. Remember?

And as for your claim that the summit discussed things without a prime minister pointing fingers, did you not see the Prime Minister address the summitters both before and after?

Did you not notice Rudd controlled the guest list and selected the topics? Did you not see him dropping in on every discussion, each co-chaired by one of his ministers? Did you not hear summitters complain the only ideas that seemed to be accepted were those that "squared with Labor policy"?

In fact, what made this discussion different to the millions held every year in this country was not the absence of the Prime Minister but his presence.

That's what has the Left so jubilant. It's not that they can now speak, but that the Prime Minister, at least and at last, is nodding. Even better, they love that there is no conservative close enough to disturb the noise of our cultural elite telling each other precisely what they most like to hear.

But let me shout a little so that Skelton can hear above the slurping.

Still here, Russell. Still here to say that you attack what you claim to defend, and betray what you claim to honour. You seek no real conversation at all; only the mute acceptance of the masses to the chatter of your elite.