From the Kitchen

16 March 2011

It would be easy, in a weekly column, to comment on current or recent events. I am more interested in looking at what allows events to unfold as they do and to ask questions that help me better understand why what is happening is happening.

George Orwell wrote: "Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past."[1] We need to know and understand what is going on in the world in order to have any power to change those things we cannot accept. If we remain ignorant, we hand that power to others. It is vitally important that schools teach children not just history, but teach them how to interpret that history, giving them tools to place what happened into contexts that allow them to place current events into meaningful contexts.

Having students learn to recite the kings and queens of England or the prime ministers of Australia is not teaching history. Understanding the aspirations, dreams and motivations of people like Henry Parkes, Alfred Deakin, Charles Cameron Kingston, John Forrest, Philip Fysh, George Turner, George Reid and Edmund Barton may help us understand the way power is exercised in Australia today – how the balance is maintained between competing interests and conflicting imperatives. Reading newspaper accounts, correspondence and essays of the 1850s to 1901 can help throw light on why New Zealand decided to not be part of the Commonwealth of Australia and why Western Australia almost didn't. It helps us understand why there are still tensions between Western Australia and New South Wales and between north and south Queensland, and why Victoria and New South Wales were at odds over trade protection and the location of the new nation's capital.

In the wider world, understanding who did what and why they did it, going back several hundred years, helps us to understand the political and social forces that are at play today. This is not to deny that almost everything has changed and continues to change rapidly. Even so, understanding past changes can inform our understanding of current ones. In fact, it can be those very changes that are critical to our making sense of much of what is going on now and how we relate to current events.

Two hundred years ago, news and people moved around the world at the speed of a sailing ship. If there was a natural disaster in Europe in 1811, no-one in Australia would know about it for months; likewise, news of events in Australia remained unknown in Europe for months. In fact, news could be lost in transit with the loss of a ship. When Krakatau[2] erupted in 1883, the news would have reached Europe within hours over the telegraph cables linking Darwin to the rest of the world. Any aid to come from Europe would still have taken weeks by steamship. Now, if there is a disaster anywhere in the world, we can know about it within minutes and the news can include colour pictures and video. Help can be on its way quickly, restricted only by organisational limits and will, and help can be at the disaster site within hours of despatch from anywhere in the world.

I remember in 2001 watching, on television, all but the first minutes of the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York as it was happening and continuing to watch events as they

unfolded for some six hours. I saw as much as at the same time people in New York were seeing.

Two hundred years ago, distance was 'real' – travel and communication took the same time and used the same technology. People's perceptions of what was happening in the world, whether locally or thousands of kilometres away, was limited by personal witness and what could be read about it at the hands of others, removed by time delays. And not everyone could read, so many depended on word of mouth. To make sense of what was happening, or had happened, depended very much on how those events were reported – what filters they had passed through. Today we still receive filtered news, but we also have access to raw information in words and images. The gap between personal travel and information travel has collapsed because the quality of the information can be such that it is as if we were there.

Does this change the way we make sense of the world and our lives in it? Do we, without 'political' power, have more control over the present and, therefore, the future? Can we make sufficient sense of the flood of information to sift it in a way that allows us to use it to construct the future as we would want it to be? Or are we still limited by those with vested interests who would want us to think in a particular way and construct our future as they wish it to be? Having moved from relying solely on others' interpretations of limited information, how and where do we acquire the tools critical to creating our own useful interpretations of the barrage of data, without drowning in it?

1. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, orig. pub. 1949 by Secker & Warburg, London
2. in the Sunda Strait between Sumatra and Java. For a description see http://history1800s.about.com/od/thegildedage/a/krakatoa.htm