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Tuning in to old beat renewed

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If twaddle TV really is in decline, it reflects a wider changing of the times, writes Andrew West.

THE great historians have often used cataclysmic events - wars, plagues, revolutions and depressions - to signal the end of one epoch and the dawn of another. Arnold J. Toynbee, the father of this school of history, believed World War I marked the beginning of the end of empire. Eric Hobsbawm considered the French Revolution the midwife of modern Europe. And Arthur Schlesinger Jnr thought the election of Franklin Roosevelt in 1932 the start of a long social democratic hegemony.

But where in this august company does the international television phenomenon Big Brother fit, and what, if anything, does its recent demise indicate? As a piece of popular culture it will barely register a blip on history's radar, but many observers believe it was briefly symbolic of an era in politics - self-centred, egotistical, avaricious and exhibitionist - that is passing.

Dr Tony Moore, a cultural historian at the University of Sydney, says "different periods in history call into being their own aesthetic". He suggests Big Brother was reminiscent of the carnivalesque phenomenon of medieval Europe, in which the populace was able to cavort and subvert, in a superficial way, the authority of the church and the state. "It was not revolutionary in the political sense of overthrowing or even reforming the economic or political system," he says.

"But it allowed the so-called 'lower orders' to make their elders, and those who considered themselves pious, squirm. The Catholic and the Russian Orthodox churches licensed this behaviour as a kind of social safety valve."

That may be an apt historical parallel for a TV program that periodically ignited the outrage of the nation's elders - such as John Howard's condemnation of its often sexually explicit content. It allowed its participants to feel rebellious but never challenged the great concentrations of economic or political power. Indeed, the Big Brother franchise was a financial bonanza for the networks, the sponsors and the mobile phone companies that carried the text messages each week voting housemates off the show.

"I sense there was also a weariness with what it represented," says the social researcher and author Hugh Mackay. "Big Brother was emblematic of the tune-out generation. I suspect we are more alert and more critical and over time - not necessarily now - that will be reflected in our TV behaviour. A more socially aware society is not a society in which Big Brother has a place."

In his recent book, Advance Australia Where?, Mackay argues that for much of the past decade popular culture reflected national politics. The welter of home improvement and renovation shows echoed the nation's credit-card fuelled abundance, while the mental shutters went up against chaos, violence and want unfolding abroad.

In a recent speech to the Whitlam Institute, addressing winners of its "What Matters" essay competition for school students, Mackay observed: "We were a society in which many Australians quite deliberately took their eye off the big picture ... because it was too dark and daunting. To escape, they narrowed the focus and turned it inwards onto the things they could control.

"Home renovation was one; their own body was another - which is why we've also been living through an epidemic of cosmetic surgery, body piercing and tattoos."

But now, apart from a hardy perennial such as Better Homes And Gardens, much of the lifestyle programming that characterised the late '90s and the early years of the 21st century has disappeared. In Mackay's language, we have woken from the "dreamy period" and are ready to engage. "The tide is turning," he predicted in his speech. "Signs of re-engagement are everywhere."

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The most obvious was the result of last November's federal election. "When voters are disengaged, they just keep re-electing incumbents," he says. "You don't change a government if you are not thinking about the need for change."

But how deep is such change? Kevin Rudd styled himself as a conservative, especially on social and cultural issues, such as the intervention in Northern Territory indigenous communities and his Christian faith. But his claim to economic conservatism could also be read more subtly; he was not so much an apostle of the free market, which he once described as a "brutopia", as a believer in the virtue of personal thrift and modesty. He was rejecting both the sexual libertinism of Big Brother and the free-spending habits of The Block, Renovation Rescue and Changing Rooms, which celebrated the acquisitive society.

David Chalke, a consultant to the annual Australia Scan survey, which monitors public attitudes to social and economic change, believes Rudd read the growing sentiment for stronger government that moderates the behaviour of corporate Australia. While the 2007 election did not restore the hegemony of what the author Don Watson called the "bleeding hearts and pointy heads" - with their progressive agenda of reconciliation, rights and the republic - Chalke says it reflected "a move in sentiment we have tracked since about 2002 back towards a social democratic, Scandinavian model".

Far from feeling liberated by choice in consumer goods and services, Chalke's research found, the public was overwhelmed by, and suspicious of, free markets. "People felt pressured," he says. "Choose your electricity supplier, choose your water provider and then an industrial relations system called Work Choices. It all added up to choice paralysis."

The electorate was also looking to the government for protection from big business, Chalke says. "People are increasingly seeing the market as threatening their family life. They feel left to the mercy of forces bigger than themselves. They feel that business is not benevolent and that executive salaries had gone over the top and were obscene. They know banks can take their homes and that it's an uneven contest if you want to try to get back the $500 that Telstra has charged you for mobile calls you didn't make."

No matter how impotent the Rudd Government may be at containing grocery and petrol prices, its pre-election promise to introduce FuelWatch and GroceryWatch tapped a public desire to tame the big end of town, using watchdogs such as the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission and the Australian Securities and Investments Commission. "Just as people want more police on the streets, they also want more ACCC, more ASIC," he said.

The electorate felt torn between the demands of the free market - and their employers in a deregulated economy - and the needs of the family. For 11 years, politicians encouraged material aspiration but, as the conservative Anglican Archbishop of Sydney, Peter Jensen, once observed, "the greatest aspiration of the aspirational class is to have a fulfilling family and community life".

It is a theme the economist-turned-philosopher Clive Hamilton pursues in his new book, The Freedom Paradox. Hamilton, now a professor at Charles Sturt University's Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics, believes that much of today's crude, even exploitative pop culture has been built on the libertarian impulse of the late 1960s. The great liberation movements at the centre of the 1960s, for sexual equality and civil rights for black Americans, were "historically vital". "But the mood they engendered morphed from equality and solidarity into a kind of ego-centred narcissism," he argues. "By the early '70s we had slogans like 'Do your own thing' and 'Let it all hang out'."

Even more tellingly, the message of emancipation for historically oppressed groups was co-opted by commercial interests.

The Woodstock music festival in 1969 became the embodiment, even the apogee, of the spirit of the 1960s. Bernard Collier, sent by his New York Times editors to cover what they suspected was a drug-fuelled orgy, sent back dispatches on the communitarian ethos of the event. Thirty years later, however, Woodstock '99, which attempted to recreate the original event, turned into a giant sales promotion, with automatic teller machines, pay-per-view cable coverage, several cases of rape and even an appearance by Britney Spears. "It was an unapologetic corporate venture," Hamilton recalls.

Perhaps most disturbingly for Hamilton, the freedom of the '60s has led to a nihilistic streak in the culture, in which institutions - be they traditional academic disciplines or publicly owned services - are torn down and replaced with commercialism, even exploitation. And a partnership of capitalism and libertinism is threatening that most basic of human needs - intimacy. With its shower scenes and, most notoriously, an incident in which two male contestants held down a female and rubbed their genitals in her face, Big Brother became the exemplar of this trend. "The place where all these tumultuous currents come together is in sex and sexuality," says Hamilton. "Sex is sublime but it's also very dangerous and the libertarian view of sex has unleashed a proliferation of pornography that goes way beyond healthy erotica.

"Big Brother, in the early years, showed how easy it was to titillate the public with crassness with a sexual edge. So many people have been intimidated by the accusation that, if you object [to the surfeit of increasingly extreme pornography], you must have issues or problems."

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But Hamilton suggests two factors ultimately brought the program undone and undermined the liberal doctrine that had sanctioned it. First, it offended the values of modesty and moderation that Hamilton believes are re-emerging in Australia. And second, it transgressed the distinction between public and private behaviour. "To the extent that we advocate such values, that were perhaps characteristic of the 1950s, then I guess you could say we've become more nostalgic," says Hamilton.

"But when you walk around and see teenage girls wearing T-shirts that say 'porn star' or, even worse, one that says 'all daddy wanted was a blow job', then you ask yourself where else can society go? And you realise the big disappointment of liberalism's failure to deliver genuine freedom."

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