A cruel sting on a PhD graduate: analysis of a Daily Telegraph story

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6 September 2018, revised 29 September 2018

This document is located at http://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/18Loussikian.pdf

On 26 May 2017, a story titled “A cruel sting on terror victims,” written by Kylar Loussikian, appeared in Sydney’s newspaper The Daily Telegraph. This story is the subject of an article by me published in Pacific Journalism Review (Martin, 2018). In support of that article, additional information about the story is provided here.

In Table 1, the full text of Loussikian’s story is given in the left column. The online version of the text used here, from the Factiva database. The print edition differs in small respects.

The second column of Table 1 notes the features of a beat-up that might be associated with the text. These features are taken, sometimes in a slightly adapted form, from those itemised in Martin (2018):

In the context of the media, a beat-up is a story that, by conventional journalistic standards, does not deserve to be published because it is unverified, grossly exaggerated and/or knowingly false. Typical features of beat-ups include presenting manufactured claims, giving otherwise unexceptional information an exaggerated importance, highlighting facts taken out of context, presenting highly misleading portrayals, and using weak or dubious sources.

In Loussikian’s article, the most common features of a beat-up are giving otherwise unexceptional information exaggerated importance, highlighting facts taken out of context, and presenting highly misleading portrayals. The table, because it focuses on the text of the story, does not address one of the most important aspects that make the story a beat-up: by conventional journalistic standards, a single passage in a PhD thesis, a thesis that otherwise
has not been newsworthy, does not warrant front-page coverage.

The third column in Table 1 notes how the text serves to attack Brooks and her thesis, typically by derogatory language and guilt by association. The final column provides additional information and comment to provide context or to help assess the claims in the story.

Table 1 represents my own analysis of Loussikian’s story, so of course this analysis may be influenced by my involvement with the story. In particular, I was Brooks’ principal supervisor for her PhD thesis, and I was a secondary target in Loussikian’s story as well as in previous stories by him attacking the PhD thesis of another one of my PhD students, Judy Wilyman. Interested readers can judge for themselves by assessing Loussikian’s story in the context of Brooks’ thesis (2016), which is free online.

Here, only the text of Loussikian’s story is addressed. It would also be possible to analyse the layout of the text (fonts, placement of text) and photos, and the associated editorial and cartoon. These are reproduced at the end of this document. Each page of The Daily Telegraph is slightly smaller than an A3 sheet.

Table 1. Text from Loussikian (2017) assessed in terms of how it represents features of a beat-up and attack journalism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text from Loussikian’s story (2017)</th>
<th>Beat-up features</th>
<th>Attack features</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>THREAT LEVEL: HIVE - LOONY UNI'S DEGREES OF MADNESS [Title, p. 1]</td>
<td>Highly misleading portrayal of the thesis</td>
<td>Derogatory language (“loony,” “madness”)</td>
<td>The title may not have been written by Loussikian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife of ex-Gitmo detainee David Hicks awarded PhD for arguing bees a bigger threat than terrorists</td>
<td>Highly misleading portrayal of the thesis and the basis for awarding it</td>
<td>Denigration of Brooks by referring to her as the “wife of ex-Gitmo detainee David Hicks” rather than a person in her own right</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE estranged wife of David Hicks has been honoured with a PhD from a leading NSW university for arguing bees were more dangerous to Australians than terrorists and the federal government was “pro-torture”.</td>
<td>Highly misleading portrayal of the thesis and the basis for awarding it</td>
<td>Denigration of Brooks by referring to her as “the estranged wife of David Hicks” rather than a person in her own right</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human rights activist Aloysia Brooks was distinguished by the University of Wollongong for a thesis which examined the case of the former Guantanamo Bay inmate (right) and bizarrely claimed the number of deaths from bee stings proved our fight against terrorism was unwarranted.</td>
<td>Highly misleading portrayal of the thesis and the basis for awarding it</td>
<td>Derogatory language (“bizarrely”)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>“One could hardly imagine a war on bees occurring any time soon, and therefore, it can be concluded, that the counter-terrorism laws have been largely politically driven,” she wrote. FULL REPORT Pages 4-5</td>
<td>Highlighting a quote taken out of context</td>
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</table>

**A CRUEL STING ON TERROR VICTIMS** [title, p. 4]

<p>| Hicks’ partner gets PhD writing bizarre thesis comparing bombers to bees | Highly misleading portrayal of the thesis | Highly misleading portrayal of the thesis | Derogatory language (“bizarre”); denigration of Brooks by referring to her as “Hicks’ partner” rather than a person in her own right | The title may not have been written by Loussikian |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THE estranged partner of former Guantanamo Bay detainee David Hicks has claimed bee stings are more dangerous than terrorist attacks in a bizarre thesis for Wollongong University.</th>
<th>Highly misleading portrayal of the thesis; highlighting facts taken out of context</th>
<th>Derogatory language (&quot;bizarre&quot;); denigration of Brooks by referring to her as Hicks’ partner rather than a person in her own right</th>
<th>Brooks was divorced from Hicks at this time.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The lack of a “war on bees” proves tough counter-terrorism laws are simply political acts, according to the PhD thesis written by human rights activist Aloysia Brooks.</td>
<td>Highly misleading portrayal of the thesis; highlighting facts taken out of context</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The 360-page essay also takes aim at the ABC, News Corp Australia and the St James Ethics Centre for backing torture.</td>
<td>Misleading portrayal of thesis arguments about the groups mentioned</td>
<td>A PhD thesis is not an “essay.”</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>And it claims the federal government has a “pro-torture ideology”.</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Although evidence clearly demonstrates that state terrorism causes many more deaths than non-state terrorism does, terrorist acts perpetrated by the state are given far less attention in the mainstream media,” Dr Brooks writes. “More people die in car accidents, from domestic murders and bee stings in Australia than terrorist attacks. One could hardly imagine a war on bees occurring any time soon, and therefore, it can be concluded, that the counter-terrorism laws have been largely politically</td>
<td>Highlighting quotes taken out of context</td>
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<td>driven, rather than as a result of the need for legislation against new criminal acts.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>The PhD was awarded through Wollongong’s humanities department.</td>
<td></td>
<td>University of Wollongong PhDs are awarded by the university, not by departments or other units. The PhD was undertaken in the School of Humanities and Social Inquiry.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In another section it says “the reality is that there is no global war … the attacks on the United States in 2001 have been used as an excuse to shamelessly invade other countries.”</td>
<td>Highlighting a quote taken out of context</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The university said the views of the thesis were Dr Brooks’.</td>
<td></td>
<td>A similar statement could be made regarding every other thesis.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“(The thesis) looked in depth at the experiences of four Australian citizens, one of whom was the candidate’s spouse,” a spokesman said. “It is not unusual for academics to research areas of close personal interest, or even on occasion to include their own experiences or those of close associates.”</td>
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<td>Mr Hicks was captured in Afghanistan in 2001, charged with providing material support for terrorism, and spent six years in Guantanamo. He pleaded guilty in a deal which sent him back to Australia, but a US military court later</td>
<td>Misleading portrayal of the thesis; highlighting facts taken out of context</td>
<td>Treating Hicks’ history as central to the thesis</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
reversed the verdict after finding it couldn’t pursue that charge before 2006.

| St James Ethics Centre director Simon Longstaff disputed comments attributed to him in the thesis by Dr Brooks, and he would be “one of the last people to promote or defend torture”. | Misleading portrayal of thesis | Focus on alleged shortcomings of the thesis | From p. 249 of Brooks (2016): “Academics that defended the torture of people they deemed as terrorists are still able to spout their beliefs in public lecture rooms and classrooms around the country with no challenge. For example, the St James Ethics Centre hosted a pro-torture lecture by former Bush speech writer, Marc Theissen at the Festival of Dangerous Ideas. The Executive Director of the Ethics Centre did not think there was anything wrong with promoting pro-torture opinions to the general public, and neither did he think it was necessary to have the opposing view aired, even when he acknowledged that more people walked out of the lecture theatre holding pro-torture views than when they walked in (personal communication with Simon Longstaff, 30 October 2011). The |
St James Ethics Centre refused the opportunity to have a lecture on the problems with torture, even though there is ample evidence that points to an increasing pro-torture majority in the general public (Pew Research Center, 2016). Inevitably, those with pro-torture stance have been rewarded with public platforms that reinforce the violent actions of the state. Those who push and facilitate pro-torture rhetoric still remain largely unchallenged."

| Dr Brooks also reprinted personal communications from Mr Hicks accusing Australian Story producer Helen Grasswill of lying and attempting personal gain. “All Helen could do was tell me she wanted a Walkely (journalism award) for the story and that she thought she was qualified to write a book about me,” Dr Brooks wrote, citing notes from Mr Hicks. But Ms Grasswill, already a Walkley Award-winning journalist, told The Daily Telegraph not only was her story “accurate, fair and balanced” but Dr Brooks played a key role in working with Mr Hicks at the time of | Misleading portrayal of the thesis | Focus on alleged shortcomings of the thesis | See Brooks (2016), pp. 196–198, for Brooks’ account. |
the interview. “There’s no question that she was a player (in everything he did), not an impartial academic observer and analyser,” she said. Australian Story never suggested Mr Hicks had been treated fairly when detained at Guantanamo Bay.

Another journalist targeted by the thesis, who did not want to be named, described comments about them in the thesis as “bullshit” and “totally false”.

Mr Hicks married Dr Brooks in 2009, but the couple were estranged by last year.

Dr Brooks was supervised at Wollongong by Brian Martin, who gained notoriety after overseeing another thesis which claimed the World Health Organisation was colluding with pharmaceutical companies to spruik vaccines.

Another of Professor Martin’s students was Michael Primero, who has been associated with “truth in health science” journal Medical Veritas, which claims the Rockefeller Foundation is trying to control consciousness.

Neither Dr Brooks nor Professor Martin responded to requests for comment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus on alleged shortcomings of the thesis</th>
<th>Treating the marriage as highly relevant to the thesis</th>
<th>They were divorced.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Highly misleading portrayal</td>
<td>Brooks is tarnished by having a supervisor who had another PhD student whose thesis was supposedly suspect.</td>
<td>See Martin (2016) for a detailed critique of Loussikian’s initial attack on Judy Wilyman’s thesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See Martin (2016) for a detailed critique of Loussikian’s initial attack on Judy Wilyman’s thesis (which also targeted Michael Primero)</td>
<td>Based on previous experience with Loussikian, we</td>
<td></td>
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preferred to let the university comment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NOW THESIS NONSENSE!</th>
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<td>• In reality, more people die in car accidents, from domestic murders and bee stings in Australia than terrorist attacks.</td>
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<td>• The reality is that there is no global war... The attacks on the United States in 2001 have been used as an excuse to shamelessly invade other countries, strip their resources, line the pockets of US corporations, and decimate human rights and civil liberties in the process.</td>
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<td>• There is a host of documented evidence that indicates the Australian Government played a significant role in various conflicts in the War on Terror, not only in a military capacity, but in relation to political support in the form of pro-torture ideology.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Those who push and facilitate pro-torture rhetoric still remain largely unchallenged</td>
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[thesis title:]
*The Annihilation of Memory and Silent Suffering: Inhibiting Outrage at the Injustice of Torture in the War on Terror in Australia*

<table>
<thead>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Derogatory language</th>
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<tr>
<td>(“nonsense”)</td>
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<tr>
<td>THE HICKS FILE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>November 1999</strong> Travels to Pakistan and later joins Lashkar-e Tayyiba, a designated terrorist organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>January 2001</strong> Travels to Afghanistan to allegedly attend al-Qaeda training camps, where the US alleges he meets Osama bin Laden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>December 2001</strong> Captured by Northern Alliance and transferred to US control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>June 2004</strong> Charged with attempted murder and aiding the enemy, but charges are dropped after military commissions are found to be unconstitutional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>December 2004</strong> Alleges he has been tortured in Guantanamo Bay including being beaten, blindfolded and deprived of sleep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>February 2007</strong> Charged with providing material support for terrorism and attempted murder, pleads guilty in return for being sent back to Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>December 2007</strong> Released from Yatala prison in Adelaide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>August 2009</strong> Marries Aloysia Brooks in Sydney after meeting a year earlier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>December 2014</strong> Heckles Attorney General George Brandis at an awards night, claiming he knew that Hicks had been tortured in Guantanamo and had not tried to stop it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>February 2015</strong> The US Court of Military Commission</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
dismissed the guilty verdict after a ruling which finds material support for terrorism wasn't a viable charge in military commissions for conduct before 2006

November 2016 Charged with domestic assault of his partner, not Brooks, from whom he has now become estranged

April 2017 Police drop charges against Hicks after finding no reasonable chance of conviction

References


THREAT LEVEL: HIVE

Wife of ex-Gitmo detainee David Hicks awarded PhD for arguing bees a bigger threat than terrorists

KYLAR LOUSSIANI EXCLUSIVE

THE estranged wife of David Hicks has been honoured with a PhD from a leading VSW university for arguing bees were more dangerous to Australians than terrorists and the federal government was "pro-torture." Human rights activist Aiysha Brooks was distinguished by the University of Wollongong for a thesis which examined the case of the former Guantanamo Bay inmate (right) and brazenly claimed the number of deaths from bee stings proved our fight against terrorism was unwarranted. "One could hardly imagine a war on bees occurring any time soon, and therefore, it can be concluded, that the counter-terrorism laws have been largely politically driven," she wrote.

FULL REPORT PAGES 4-5

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**Tribunal wrong to remove decision**

**TOM MINEAR**

The Administrative Appeals Tribunal has admitted that it was wrong to take down a controversial decision from a public website in order to save the reputation of a tribunal member.

It was revealed yesterday that AAT member Miriam Holmes had written a decision — in which she overturned an order not to grant a visa to a New Zealander — taken off a legal website because it contained an error she feared could harm her reputation.

Facing a Senate hearing last night, AAT registrar Sean Leatham said it was an "error" to take down the decision.

"It's obviously not a full-on policy in our policy," Ms Leatham said.

"It was clearly an error, it wasn't consistent with our process... We clearly need to tighten up the procedure.

She said the written decision would be restored to the Australian Legal Information Institute website.

Senator Barry O'Sullivan hit out at the AAT for saving more than 80 foreign-born criminals from being locked out of Australia. He said he would call for an immediate review of the appointment process of AAT members because "it's clearly not working".

Ms Leatham claimed the AAT "welcomes scrutiny".

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**Hicks' partner gets PhD writing bizarre**

**FRIDAY MAY 26 2017 DAILYTELEGRAPH.COM.AU**

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**New funds for fight against superbugs**

**GRANT MCArTHUR**

Australians are at the cutting edge of fighting drug-resistant infections.

"The fight against drug-resistant infections is an area that, while the government has been supportive, private sector investment has lagged," Minister for Corrections David Elliott said in a statement.

"While we will need to negotiate a final outcome, this decision is a major vote of confidence in the public prison system," Minister for Corrections David Elliott said in a statement.

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**JAIL BID LOCKED UP**

A PLAN to privatise a prison in Sydney's west has faltered through the NSW government awarding the tender to an in-house bid by the corrective services department.

It was hoped a private operator for the Windsor and John Morony Correctional Centre would improve standards in the state's overcrowded jails via competition but the government yesterday announced three private providers had been beaten.

"We will need to negotiate a final outcome, this decision is a major vote of confidence in the public prison system," Minister for Corrections David Elliott said in a statement.

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**HAPPY KIDS ARE HEALTHY**

KEEPS teenagers happy could stop them taking up drinking and smoking, scientists have discovered.

The less contented schoolchildren are almost twice as likely to try alcohol and cigarettes, a UK study has found.

Researchers have discovered that this is because children, like adults, have learned to associate alcohol with feeling joyful and less anxious.

The study of 1,729 children aged 10 to 15 — published in the journal BMC Public Health — found the happiest had a 30.8 per cent chance of having tried alcohol and cigarettes, but the odds were almost doubled for the less happy, whose chances were 21.5 per cent.

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**EXCLUSIVE**

**KYLAR LOUSSIKIAN**

The estranged partner of former Guantanamo Bay detainee David Hicks has claimed he was being targeted in a bizarre thesis for Wollongong University.

In the absence of any counter-terrorism laws in Australia, the former Guantanamo detainee's estranged partner has also claimed he was being targeted in his bizarre thesis.

The 364-page essay also takes aim at the ABC, News Corp Australia and the St James Ethics Centre for backing torture.

And it claims the federal government has a "pro-torture ideology".

"Although evidence clearly demonstrates that state terrorism causes many more deaths than non-state terrorism does, terrorist attacks perpe-
trated by the state are given far less attention in the mainstream media," Dr Brooks writes.

"More people die in car acci-
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agine a war on bees occurring any time soon, and therefore, it can be concluded, that the counter-terrorism laws have been largely politically driven, rather than as a result of the need for legislation against new criminal acts."

The PhD was awarded through Wollongong's human rights department.

In another section it says "the reality is that there is no need for state terrorism, as the United States in 2008 have been used as an excuse to shamelessly invade other countries."

Dr Brooks read the thesis before the university said the views of the thesis were Dr Brooks'.

"(The thesis) looked in depth at the experiences of four Australian citizens, all of whom was the candidate's spouse," a spokesman said.

"It is not unusual for academ-
ics to research areas of close personal interest, or even on occasion to include their own experiences or those of close associates."

Mr Hicks was captured in Afghanistan in 2001, charged with providing material support for terrorism, and spent six years in Guantanamo.

He pleaded guilty in a deal which sent him back to Australia, but a US military court later reversed the verdict after finding it couldn't pursue that charge before 2006.

St James Ethics Centre director Simon Longstaff disputed comments attributed to him in the thesis by Dr Brooks, and he would be...
**thesis comparing bombers to bees**

**NOW THESIS NONSENSE!**

In reality, more people die in car accidents, from domestic murders and bee stings in Australia than terrorist attacks.

One could hardly imagine a war or bees occurring any time soon, and therefore, it can be concluded, that the (counter terrorism) laws have been largely politically driven.

The reality is that there is no global war... The attacks on the United States in 2001 have been used as an excuse to shamelessly invade other countries, strip their resources, line the pockets of US corporations, and decimate human rights and civil liberties in the process.

There is a host of documented evidence that indicates the Australian Government played a significant role in various conflicts in the War on Terror, not only in a military capacity, but in relation to political support in the form of pro-torture ideology.

Those who push and facilitate pro-torture rhetoric still remain largely unchallenged.

The Annihilation of Memory and Silent Suffering: Inhibiting Outrage at the Injustice of Torture in the War on Terror in Australia

"one of the last people to promote or defend torture".

Dr Brooks also reprinted personal communications from Mr Hicks accusing Australian Story producer Helen Grasswill of lying and attempting personal gain.

"All Helen could do was tell me she wanted a Walkley (journalism award) for the story and that she thought she was qualified to write a book about me," Dr Brooks wrote, citing notes from Mr Hicks.

But Ms Grasswill, already a Walkley Award winning journalist, told The Daily Telegraph not only was her story "accurate, fair and balanced" but Dr Brooks played a key role in working with Mr Hicks at the time of the interview.

"There's no question that she was a player in every thing he did, not an impartial academic observer and analyst," she said.

Australian Story never suggested Mr Hicks had been treated fairly when detained at Guantanamo Bay. Another journalist targeted by the thesis, who did not want to be named, described comments about them in the thesis as "bulsh" and "totally false".

Mr Hicks married Dr Brooks in 2009, but the couple were estranged by last year.

Dr Brooks was superseded at Wollongong by Brian Martin, who gained notoriety after overseeing another thesis which claimed the World Health Organisation was colluding with pharmaceutical companies to swamp vaccines.

Another of Professor Martin's students was Michael Primero, who has been associated with "truth in health science" journal Medical Veritas, which claims the Rockefeller Foundation is trying to control consciousness.

Neither Dr Brooks nor Professor Martin responded to requests for comment.

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**Hunt for Leveson body to continue**

**JULIA CARLISLE**

The resumed search for the remains of murdered man Matthew Leveson in dense bushland south of Sydney will continue for another day.

Detectives returned to the Royal National Park on Monday in a renewed bid to unearth any trace of the 20-year-old who disappeared 10 years ago but nothing has been recovered at this stage, a police spokeswoman said yesterday.

This week's search is the third in the past six months, after fruitless searches in November and January.

Investigators were originally led to the remote roadside site by Mr Leveson's former boyfriend, Michael Atkins, who was acquitted of the younger man's murder in 2009.

He took detectives there after he was offered immunity from prosecution for perjury and contempt of court after admitting to lying at an inquest into the suspected murder.

An ongoing inquest into the death of Mr Leveson, who was last seen leaving Darlinghurst's ARQ nightclub with Mr Atkins in the early hours of September 23, 2007, is scheduled to resume in August.

Mr Atkins told the inquest in November he led detectives about buying a mattock and tape on the day Mr Leveson went missing in 2007.

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**Car strike walker dies**

A 70-year-old pedestrian has died in hospital a day after being struck by a car that was being driven away in Sydney's inner west.

Police said the 84-year-old driver of a Toyota Yaris was driving out of a property at Rozelle when he struck the pedestrian.

The 70-year-old man was taken to Royal Prince Alfred Hospital but died from the injuries he sustained, a police spokesman said.

The driver has been released pending any further inquiries.

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SHERIDAN AT MYER

EST. 1947
Menzies just a memory

The anniversary of the ‘Forgotten People’ speech has evoked deep soul searching for the Liberal Party

And so Menzies disappeared into the shadows for all time. For there is no way back on Australian politics.”

The finality of that judgment and the power of its prophecy was provided by the stature of the man who wrote it.

Alan Reid, one of the granite figures of Australian political reporting, had watched Robert Menzies turn the light out in his office and walk alone down a darkened corridor into oblivion.

At least that is what Reid believed when Menzies forfeited the prime ministership and then the leadership of the United Australia Party in 1944.

Menzies proved the pundits wrong. He came back from the wilderness. Not only did he effectively create his own political party, but he went on to serve as Prime Minister of Australia for a record period from 1949 to 1966. His dominance of the Labor Party and the broader labour movement was complete.

Among leftist Baby Boomers even the mention of his name still evokes irrational rage. He presided over Australia’s emergence as a confident prosperous nation.

Yet, he is still dismissed in fashionable circles as a kickstipple to the British throne, a bland conservative whose dead hand stifled such pioneering Australian creative talent as Bob Ellis and Germaine Greer.

Sadly he only drove one of that ghastly pair into permanent exile. But nobody is perfect.

Despite the irrational hatred he still inspires his record speaks for itself. Like Ramsden’s average, the numbers provide their own defence. He was not flawless.

Despite many modern Liberals invoking his legacy this week he was not a steadfast proponent of small government for its own sake. He believed in individual initiative and the civilising influence of the traditional family.

In speaking directly to the middle class, while bravely denying that class really mattered in Australia, he defined the terms of the domestic political debate in a way that totally marginalised Labour.

His appeal to the “Forgotten People” achieved perfect resonance in an Australia tired of war-time rationing and government regulations. But by the standards of post-Thatcherite conservatism both in size and scope of activities he led big governments. In that, he was consummately a man of his times.

That, of course, was his great strength. Only two other Australian prime ministers can lay claim to the same instinctive grasp of the hopes and insecurities of their nation as Menzies. They were Bob Hawke and John Howard, both of whom emulated him in leading their parties into government from the political wilderness.

If one contemporary issue could accuse Menzies’ ire, it would almost certainly be the Coalition’s intensifying clash with the Catholic systemic school system.

By expounding state aid to Catholic schools Menzies broke Labor’s grip on the votes of middle-class Catholics. One suspects he would be bemused at the futility of the current fight.

This week Liberals have been coming through the text of Menzies’ Forgotten People Address, which was broadcast on the Macquarie Radio network on May 22, 1942.

As Tony Abbott observed in a column for a News Limited paper this week, the test of Menzies’ speech is that it remains relevant to the Liberal Party today.

That Abbott sought to clothe himself in the mantle of Menzies is hardly surprising. Like Menzies, words and ideas matter deeply to Abbott.

He insisted on writing his own speeches. He frustrated staff who thought his time would be better spent on other matters.

But as a journalist and author, Abbott is fiercely proud of his ability to communicate ideas through text. And he is a powerful polemicist. He lacks Menzies’ theatrical bent and mellifluous voice. As an orator he is not in the same class as Menzies. But then neither was Howard and nor is Malcolm Turnbull.

The enduring importance of Menzies’ famous broadcast is in its recognition of the moral and spiritual dimensions of politics.

In an era suffused by the transient fashions of social media and the almost complete erosion of civility in democratic discourse, Menzies did speak to the highest instincts of his listeners.

His manifesto was brilliant in its elasticity and refusal to fight on the arid terrain of materialistic politics that were the legacy of the Russian Revolution.

Liberals have been asking what Menzies would make of the contemporary Liberal Party. I am not so bold as to venture a guess, given that he governed during my childhood and I never met him. But one thing seems certain to me.

Unless the current generation of Liberals are able to achieve the unity that Menzies was able to restore to the Centre-Right of Australian politics when he founded the Liberals then the party may not have an assured future.

At present the party is riven by division and struggling to raise money and attract the volunteers to conduct election campaigns.

It is breeding votes and members to insurgent parties on its right flank and facing a Labor Party with access to lavish union funding and activist groups such as GetUp.

As we reflect on Menzies’ legacy, it is not alarming to ask whether the Liberals can survive in opposition? Likewise, if they lose the next election, can they govern again without the support of a splinter party of the far right?

Menzies and Howard both stood astride their party and the nation.

But their broad church is in the grip of a schism.

The feud between Turnbull and Abbott is merely a symptom. Each represents a strand of a tradition of which Menzies would never have recognised. But neither seems large enough to preside over a coherent whole.

There are ambiguous lessons from history for the Liberals this week.

Menzies was deeper in the political wilderness than Abbott when he delivered his epic radio address. But Menzies unified the conservative vote.

Neither of his current heirs seem capable of emulating him.

Catherine McGregor

In the News

(Menzies) led big governments and was consummately a man of his times.