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Keep to your day job, Prime Minister Howard!

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THIS is a publisher's paradise, a soapbox in Hyde Park on a continental scale. The TV breakfast show affirms it the morning I switched on, sitting over my Crunchy Nut cereal in soya milk.

Australia has the highest magazine launch per capita in the world, asserts the media analyst. Seldom does a week pass without one new magazine hitting the stands.

One woman in a street survey ticks off the magazines she buys every week - woman's magazine, health and medical, gardening, grooming, personal development, living - she goes on and on.

Doesn't surprise me. Audited magazine circulation numbers go into seven figures - that's in the million, if you need the fingers to count them off - for the top mags.

Magazines, mind you, we're talking about. Not newspapers.

Get into a commuter train in Melbourne. Two things you will find with every other woman, man or child. A carry bag of sorts, to fit in an extra layer or two of clothing, and a fold-up umbrella - they don't say Melbourne goes through four seasons in a day for nothing - and something to read/do. Novel, fiction/non-fiction, magazine, newspaper, crossword puzzle, photocopied study text/lecture notes

Doesn't surprise you that everyone has an opinion - and is not shy to tell it to you as s/he thinks fit, in your face!

Journalism is a profession. Writers, poets are legend. Theatre is as much social/political commentary as it is entertainment.

The Instant Cafe Theatre Company rated no mention in Malaysia that my search could throw up, the night they played for the ministers and top brass from 21 countries who turned up in Kuala Lumpur in November for the annual summit of leaders of the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation forum.

The political commentator in The Australian Financial Review devoted his column to Instant Cafe's antics. With a sting in the tail of course: "Satire at Apec obscures Malaysia's repression".

He wrote: "The assembled Foreign Ministers and officials were amazed that (International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri) Rafidah (Aziz), a Mahathir loyalist, would have arranged so sharp a satire in the middle of an episode of political repression."

"Culture vultures", I hear mutterings under suppressed breath in Malaysia, not without a measure of derision; of Instant Cafe, not of the AFR. Culture vultures, legal eagles - they are figments of derisive rhythm and alliteration in commentary about "the elite" of Bangsar. Style with no substance; of no consequence.

Theatre, satire, writers and the political cartoon are insufficiently appreciated arts in Malaysia. If Instant Cafe rates talking about, it is for the hit-and-miss of their "jokes".

The other day in Canberra, a mud-spattered car pulled up outside Parliament House. It was the end of the 600-km road for bush poet laureate Les Murray, who had driven from his rural retreat in Bunyah, on the New South Wales north coast, to answer the call of the Prime Minister, John Howard.

For two hours they talked over lunch at the Prime Minister's official residence at the Lodge about the craft of writing - just the two of them, in private.

Howard had two weeks earlier in Parliament "threatened" to unleash his

penmanship on Australians, in personally rewriting the preamble in the Constitution. As the former solicitor modestly put it, he had no doubt about his capacity to "pen the odd word".

But as he humbly qualified his assertion, he would "certainly not be so presumptuous as to pass up the opportunity of seeking the advice of other gifted wordsmiths".

That brought howls of objections. Not without some good-natured ribbing. "John Winston Howard, Prime Minister of Australia, is noted for many things, but a rhetorical gift akin to that of the great British Prime Minister with whom he shares a name, Sir Winston Churchill, is not one of them," The Age kicked off its editorial on the subject.

"Those who can write simply write, Prime Minister," The Age chided Howard, "and others refer to them as writers. Those who cannot write use folksy phrases such as 'penning the odd word', and refer to themselves as wordsmiths. Composing a constitutional preamble is a job for writers, and wordsmiths shouldn't be allowed within cooe of it."

Stick to your day job, Prime Minister!

It was the day job that had got the ruckus going. The previous week, Howard had announced the substance of a national referendum to be held on Nov 6. Voters will be asked to approve two questions: whether Australia should become a republic, and whether to accept a new, legally non-binding preamble to the Constitution.

Howard's decision to put two questions to the people at the referendum was over the head of many of his party colleagues. Republicans within Howard's own conservative Liberal Party - which is not insubstantial, led by his party deputy, the Treasurer Peter Costello, and numerous senior Cabinet Ministers - think asking two questions unnecessarily complicates the republic issue.

Howard remains adamant. The new preamble would be "aspirational and inspirational", he told members of Parliament. It would include reference to four items, he told a specially convened joint party meeting that night.

They were a commitment to God, to equality of men and women before the law, to representative democracy, and an acknowledgement of the prior occupation of Australia by Aborigines.

How - and who - to word this in Jeffersonian inspiration and elegance is the problem. Enter Murray, "the bush poet come to distil the nation's soul", as Dr Mark McKenna, political science lecturer at the Australian National University in Canberra, put it.

The way Murray tells it, the Murray household in rural Bunyah had taken a telephone call from the Prime Minister, asking him to write a draft of a preamble rewrite. Howard had apparently read it "and thought it was all right", Murray told The Age.

"So he rang me up at home, but I wasn't there, so he tracked me down overseas and said, 'Can we get together when you get back?'"

So it was that Prime Minister and poet got together.

So what's in a word, or a few words? A show over nothing? Mutual ego massage? Or is there some ulterior motive in a conspiracy to undermine the republic push, by committed monarchist Howard?

"How the PM hijacked the soul of the republic" was the subject of McKenna's commentary in The Age.

Another commentary questioned the integrity of "two-faced" Murray - Murray himself jokes about the half of his face that stays impassively frozen, an affliction of the Bell's Palsy that he suffers from - who had called for a republic in the 1970s, who today remains a "republican", but who sees nothing wrong in his accepting last year the Queen's Gold Medal for poetry.

"I can't see anything wrong with accepting a gong from the head of a friendly foreign power," he told The Age, referring to Britain's Queen Elizabeth, who is nominally Queen of Australia, exercising sovereignty through the Governor-General in Canberra.

Howard has flagged the unveiling of his preamble rewrite any day now. Whether there is more to his motives than mere words, we'll have to wait for the next instalment, as they say in classic Chinese text.

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