Australian writer protests new censorship measures

Frank Moorhouse speaks with WSWS

Richard Phillips
9 February 2009

Frank Moorhouse, an award-winning novelist and movie script writer, is one of several Australian artists who have opposed *Protocols for Working with Children*, the Australia Council's censorious code of behaviour for artists, exhibitors and publishers depicting children in their work. (See "Australian artists face new censorship measures")

Moorhouse's novels include: *Forty-Seventeen* (1988), *Grand Days* (1993) and *Dark Palace* (2000); and film scripts: *The Girl from the Family of Man* (1970), *The Machine Gun* (1971), *Between Wars* (1974), *The Girl Who Met Simone de Beauvoir in Paris* (1980), *The Coca-Cola Kid* (1985) and *The Ever-Lasting Secret Family* (1988). His 2006 essay "The writer in a time of terror", about how so-called anti-terror legislation is undermining basic democratic rights, was awarded the Alfred Deakin essay prize and a Walkley "Social Equity in Journalism" award.

Moorhouse spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the protocols late last year.

Frank Moorhouse: The Australia Council protocols appear to be connected to some sort of new prudery or a new moral panic. I'm not sure what to call it yet but the council has created a wild beast and one that could bureaucratically cascade into a whole range of regulations restricting what artists and writers are allowed to deal with.

The arts is supposed to be at its best when it challenges sacred cows. But what happens if these protocols are extended into other areas that government authorities decide shouldn't be explored? The end result will be X-rated art.

Of course, no one wants to harm children but this moral panic mind-set is being extended to the issues of nudity and sexuality in general, which are all part of the human experience. There are television warnings before programs indicating violence, coarse language or sex acts, but I've even seen these warnings before nature programs telling audiences that the show has animals devouring other animals. This is ridiculous.

The Australia Council's job is not to develop protocols but to argue for freedom of expression as a basic right and to raise concern about anything that impedes that right. Its job is not to look after children—there are plenty of agencies for that. In fact, it should be arguing for the maximum involvement of children in the making of art.

Richard Phillips: The protocols have emerged as part of an escalating attack on freedom of expression. The banning of the movie *Ken Park* from the Sydney Film Festival in 2003 was an important turning point. What's your comment on these developments?

FM: The ban on *Ken Park* was significant and also [former Attorney-General Philip] Ruddock's decision in 2006 to bring the classification board [Office of Film and Literature Classification] directly under the Attorney-General's Department.

Politicians often cite surveys attempting to prove that the Australian population is conservative with regard to the arts and so-called moral issues but the public is much more open-minded. They're game for anything as far as writing and the arts in general. It's the politicians who are out of touch and who are responding to mainly religious pressure groups, which make a lot more noise than their membership and their reasoning justifies.

RP: How much does the Australia Council dispense each year?

FM: I don't know the exact figure but it's the major funding body and all artists, writers and people coming into the arts, regardless of their age, go to it for finance. I don't know whether anyone could function in the arts without the

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Australia Council.

The literature section, for example, provides research, travel and promotion money and there are training grants. It also brings agents and publishers from other countries to Australia to meet writers and artists.

RP: Were you surprised with the government and media hysteria over the Henson issue?

FM: I could see why the religious groups saw a target in Bill Henson but the hysteria was ridiculous. None of the politicians, or anyone else for that matter, has ever identified who was supposed to have been harmed by the Henson photographs—the young girls and boys who modelled for him—or anyone else.

Rudd's reaction was disappointing and ill-conceived and then it snowballed with all the politicians eventually buckling, including [Liberal leader] Malcolm Turnbull, who had a Henson photograph and had defended him. It should have been [Peter] Garrett's job as arts minister to stand up to Rudd, but it's obvious he would never do that.

RP: A key element in the assault on freedom of expression is that the Labor and Liberal parties lack any popular support and are desperately trying to curry favour with right-wing religious lobby groups.

FM: You're probably right. I'm certainly sure that Rudd and his inner circle would look for a base of support in the religious right. They no doubt calculate that it has some electoral value. Most of the people I know put Rudd into government not because they had any faith in Labor but to just get rid of Howard. It was an anti-Howard vote.

Every Labor government, of course, is different—Whitlam [1972-75] had a very progressive policy on the arts—but there is no doubt that what we have now is unrecognisable as a Labor government and certainly at odds with the demographic changes and attitudes of ordinary people and the young. Rudd reminds me a bit of the right-wing Catholic layers in the ALP in the 40s and 50s.

Épater la bourgeoisie [shock the bourgeoisie] was an expression used by bohemian artists and writers in the nineteenth century, and although there are no defiant manifestoes and statements there is a tremendous interest in the arts today. Just look at the fantastic growth in attendances at arts and writers festivals. Hundreds of thousands of people attend these events each year and at least 2,000 people go to a bookshop event each week in Australia.

The number of people attending the biennale in Sydney this year, a cutting edge visual arts event, was up 37 percent. There are 45 writers' festivals each year in Australia and attendances have increased 10-20 percent year on year, so there is something going on. I spoke at a writers' festival in Newcastle this year and there were about 1,000 kids there. It was very impressive.

The people who go to these events don't want the government intervening to clean up bad language, nudity or sexual references or what the authorities are obsessed with at any particular time. They don't look like bohemians, but they have a strong commitment to freedom of expression.

Art and festival goers may well be a counter-weight to the rise of the religious right. They're certainly liberal in their attitudes and could be mobilised against the sort of measures being introduced by the government and the Australia Council.

I'm sure there must be people on the Australia Council who are very worried about all this, but they've been silent. Perhaps some thought that by developing the protocols they could make some sort of strategic manoeuvre around the issue. Unfortunately they're pretty servile towards the government and have bought into all the moral panic. If they think that what they've done is strategic then it is a bad strategy, and one with endless repercussions.

The Australia Council has to reposition itself, return to its core mission and stand up to the government and calm things down. Unfortunately, I don't think this is going to happen. They are so frightened, regulated and uptight and have absolutely dropped the ball on this issue.

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