

## ARTICLE

# The Empty Centre: *The Hollowmen* and Representations of Techno-Political Elites in Australian Public Life

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This article argues that 2008–2009 Australian Broadcasting Corporation comedy *The Hollowmen* reveals an ‘empty centre’ within Australian public life; a vortex formed from a circling of techno-political elites within the centre of government. The show’s humour comes from the juxtaposition of the established forms and aesthetics associated with Westminster-style responsible government and the discourses of spin and image management of the party apparatchiks. There is a lack of substance in *The Hollowmen*. Power is conservative, reacting rather than instigating change, a circling game for techno-political elites. In laughing at this, *The Hollowmen* seems to have pre-empted some of the Trump-era malaise of public institutions in Global North nations.

**Keywords:** television; political satire; Australian public life; *The Hollowmen*; techno-political elite; TV comedy

## Introduction

One of the many myths and misnomers of the white occupation of Australia was the idea of the ‘empty centre’; a physical, emotional and spiritual nothingness that generated rational desires for it to be filled and also was an alien experiential void terrorising the self-assurance of the white settler (Wills 1984). Fundamentally racist and tied to the constitution of the settler state in *terra nullius* (Byrne 2017), imagining the Australian continent as containing an empty centre ignores the time immemorial knowing, living and flourishing of the First Nation people (Weinert, Crawley and Tranter 2020). Nevertheless, it is seductive imagery, the nothing at the core, the black hole, the eye of the storm.

This article inverts the usual deployment of the ‘empty centre’ in Australia. It applies it directly to the core of the Australian settler state, specifically those institutions and practices that have grown from the British legacy of Westminster-style parliamentary governance. It is argued that the 2008–2009 Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) comedy *The Hollowmen* reveals an empty centre within Australian public life. The show reveals a nothingness marked out by the circling tension between the established forms and aesthetics associated with Westminster-style responsible government and populist impulses driven by the spin and image management of the party apparatchiks. It shows public life in Australia becoming an empty, circling game for techno-political elites.

This argument is in three parts. The first part locates *The Hollowmen* within two traditions. The first is humour in Australian public life, the tradition of laughing at politicians and the powerful and the use of humour by politicians and the powerful in public life. The second is the boutique tradition of televised political satire and particularly the cultural influence on Australian public life of the seminal British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) comedies *Yes Minister* (1980–1984) and *Yes Prime Minister* (1986–1988) (*Yes M/PM*). The second part argues that *The Hollowmen* reveals the exercise of power in Australia to be an absence. Rather the show portrays two competing techno-political elites – the vestiges of the civil service and the frantic fixers from the party-political machine – that achieve nothing. Power has become conservative, reacting rather than instigating change. The third part argues that in showing Australian public life as a circling game for rival technical elites and in laughing at this awareness, *The Hollowmen* seems to have pre-empted some of the Trump-era malaise towards public institutions in Global North nations.

## *The Hollowmen* in Australia’s Political Satire Television Landscape

This part locates *The Hollowmen* within the tradition of humour in Australian public life. A significant feature of Australian public life has been an irreverent humour towards politicians and the powerful, often encapsulated by the idea of the ‘larrikin.’ This has infused public life itself, with notable politicians identified for their larrikinism and

cutting wit. Given this, it seems strange that there have been few Australian television series finding humour in (or poking fun at) Australian politics and public life. There is a small, boutique tradition involving the political satire television show; the most notable, and culturally significant in Australia, has been the *Yes M/PM* series shown and regularly repeated by the ABC over the 1980s and 1990s. In some ways *The Hollowmen* is the millennial retake on *Yes M/PM* within the changed manifestation of the Westminster traditions in Australia.

The Australian political humourist Max Gillies has noted:

one peculiarity of Australian humour ... comes from desperation rather than despair. Desperation with complacency, comfort and oppressive conformity. Out of cultural complacency you don't get tragedy. But you get comedy (Gillies in Thomson 1986: 215).

Indeed, satire in Australia often masks natural and social tragedies (Turner and Sturges 1979; Jones 1988). The desperation at tragic events and circumstances – drought, death, isolation, being ordered to scale fortress-like cliffs in the Dardanelles – becomes articulated and transmuted into a performance of humorous asides and witticism. This mocking of others and groups, as well as the self, has been identified as a very Australian 'acculturating ritual' (Davis 2009). The origins of this national style of humour have been located in the colonial establishment of the settler state in Australia (Simmonds 2009).

The cultural formation of Australian identity and institutions, particularly from 1850 onwards, was influenced by local concerns driven by the desires and anxieties of the settler state and empire's own vision of political self-government and cultural self-determination (Buchan 2008). The emerging (white) societies in the Australian colonies that formed the federal nation in 1901 were distinctly aware that they were different to crowded, hierarchical and rigidly stratified England. Humour was one vector through which Australian identity could be asserted against the imperial core. This was personified by the 'larrikin' who, according to Gorman, mocked 'pomposity and smugness, taking the piss out of people ... sceptical, iconoclastic, egalitarian ... and above all defiant' (1990: x). The colonial larrikin was a powerful and useful figure in national rhetoric in bringing together different groups under the banner of Australia (Collins 2007; Moore 2007). Reflecting on the process of nationalism, the larrikin was an effective means of working out who was 'truly at home in both the land and the society' (Davis 2009: 38) and who were Australians – that is, as Higgie identifies, those who fit within the dominant 'hegemonic model of national identity' (2015: 65). Through articulating the difference between 'us and them', the larrikin also served as the guardian of Australian values of 'a fair go' by reminding us all that we are equally anomalous in the inimical natural environment (Higgie 2015; Jones 1988).

With the advent of television in the late 1950s, this home-grown style of comedy became 'carnavalesque' focused on interrogating tensions within Australian culture and the suffocation of everyday life (Moore 2007). Barry Humphries' alter egos Dame Edna Everage, who is 'the light at the end of every housewife's tunnel' (Humphries 2018: 0:10:47), and the shambolic Sir Les Patterson, who claims that 'Australia is the best place in the world to satirise' (Humphries 2015: 0:12:43), are the predominant figures in Moore's carnivalesque on Australia's small screen. Humphries' characters were post-colonial larrikins who presented a savage critique of Australian life, with a degree of anti-British sentiment. This projection of the larrikin has not only been deployed to satirise Australian public life, but also within Australian politics.

Former Labor Prime Ministers Bob Hawke (1983–1991) and Paul Keating (1991–1996) transformed Australian society and the economy with a centre-left policy agenda. Hawke endeared himself to the public through cultivating an accessible 'larrikin persona of humour, charm, love of sport and his hard-drinking antics' (Higgie 2015: 66). He carved out an image that epitomised the ordinary working Australian despite his Rhodes scholarship to Oxford. Hawke's everyday 'Aussie bloke' persona was counterbalanced by his then Treasurer Paul Keating. Keating's wit was his political weapon, readily set up and unapologetically fired at political opponents. The political contest for Keating, especially when he usurped Hawke as Prime Minister, was free and uninhibited entertainment in Parliament during question time. As veteran political journalist George Megalogenis points out, Keating's approach was 'downhill, one ski, no poles' (2007: 47) leading to his presentation in the public domain consisting largely of a performance of ridicule, insults and humorous exaggerations. His success did not solely derive from his use of playground language such as 'scumbag', but from his ability to skilfully use all the dimensions of rhetoric in communicating to the electorate an accurate and realistic state of affairs. Keating was possibly the last of the great Australian political orators whose verbal dexterity entertained and informed, and arguably enriched, Australian public life (Daly 1977). Together Hawke and Keating were, as Anthony Moore dubbed, democratic larrikins (2007).

Although larrikinism pervades Australian public culture, Australian political satire on television is a 'rare flower' (Morris 2016). Earlier notable small screen comedies such as *The Mavis Bramston Show* (1964–1968) and *The Norman Gunston Show* (1975–1976) flirted with political satire within a skit format. However, it was not until 1984 that Australians could watch a genuine political satire with *The Gillies Report* (1984–1985) and then the *Rubbery Figures* (1986–1990). Both television shows were a great success largely owing to the serendipitous timing of the election of the Hawke Labor government (Bye 2007). *The Gillies Report* particularly was celebrated, not because it demystified the political system, but because it shared a joke over 'the power of personality' (Bye 2007: 82). Projecting the absurdity of specific Australian political figures during a time when the state was being pulled towards a neoliberal way of life (Weinert 2020), both these shows provided a distraction, albeit temporarily.

The national broadcaster, the ABC, has been the home of Australian political satire. The ABC has weathered much criticism and political fallout in supporting political satirical productions such as the *The Norman Gunston Show*, *The Gillies Report*, *Shaun Micallef's Mad as Hell* (2012–) and the various political satires from the Chaser team (1999–). However, despite these risks the ABC has always provided a national space for laughing at politics. Generally, the focus of these shows has been an unrelenting attack on the person of the politician and a mockery of their respective policy platforms and political values through 'ambush interviews', impersonations and lampooning. Australian comedy was less interested in the machinery of government and the democratic system. For this, Australians had BBC's *Yes M/PM* series.

The success of the *Yes M/PM* series in Australia can probably be traced to various cultural connections. First is the shared sense of absurdist and self-mocking humour (Sinkeviciute 2017). Australians have been enthusiastic consumers of imported British comedy. Skit shows from the Spike Milligan-led *The Goon Show* (1951–1960), to the various incarnations of *Monty Python* (1969–1974) and the *Goodies* (1970–1982) to British sitcoms and speculative fiction comedies like *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* (1981) and the initial run *Red Dwarf* (1988–1993) have had high rotation on the ABC particularly during the 1980s and 1990s. Second, some of the attraction of Australians to British comedy could also be a deep larrikin impulse of enjoying laughing at the Brits (Weis 1986). Specifically for *Yes M/PM*, Weis identified a third factor: that the show's projection and playing with the institutions and mechanics of the Westminster system resonated with Australian audiences (1986). During the self-governing colonial period the Australian colonies were at the forefront of developing the Westminster parliamentary model, introducing reforms such as universal male suffrage and the secret ballot from the 1850s, providing in some colonies 'elected' upper houses, extending the franchise to women in South Australia and Queensland in the 1890s, and in the emergence of the Labor Party in the 1890s, and the first Labor government in Queensland in 1899, the genesis of the modern parliamentary political party. The Westminster system not only has deep roots in Australia, but Australia has been an innovator and often exported back to the 'mother country' features that have come to be identified as part of the Westminster system. Further, during the self-government and early federal period, Australia developed an identifiable, professional civil service that closely resembled the officious men from Whitehall screened in *Yes M/PM* (Halligan 2003: 70). What this meant was that *Yes M/PM* was not just an opportunity for Australians to laugh at the haughty English but was a 'satirical attack on the institution of politics' highly familiar to Australians (Lane 2010).

The *Yes M/PM* series was different from the usual skit comedy show that had been on Australian television. It was a situational comedy opening up to audiences the upper workings of responsible government and the machinations of power between an earnest and mostly inexperienced Minister Jim Hacker (Paul Eddington) and the sophisticated permanent departmental head Sir Humphrey Appleby (Nigel Hawthorne). In closely mapping and chasing the political events of its broadcast present, *Yes M/PM* presented characters and context that seemed credible and real (Fielding 2014). Nigel Hawthorne would recall how the Queen was surprised to find that he was not Sir Humphrey (Granville 2009). Through Antony Jay's and Jonathan Lynn's extremely clever writing, *Yes M/PM* revealed the 'real' of daily public life as a game by men in government within an inert state. Despite Hacker's good intentions his reform ideals were stymied at every opportunity by an indefatigable Sir Humphrey. In doing so, the show projected lessons about the thin veneer of 'democratic governance' within the Westminster system dominated by an entrenched, self-serving civil service. The success of the *Yes M/PM* series in Australia went to the very centre of Australian public life. When on a national tour Paul Eddington was shepherded around the country and given access to the highest levels of government by a star-struck Hawke (Granville 2009). The show also has had a legacy on the institutions of Australian government. In particular it has been identified as providing the inspiration and impetus for the increased restructuring and contracting out of the Australian civil service since the 1990s (Sawer 2003; Kimber and Maddox 2003). These reforms, often referenced in the literature discussing neoliberalism, led to significant changes in the structure and working of the Australian civil services, especially at the Commonwealth level, since the 1990s, although the origins of these reforms dated back to the Whitlam Labor government (1972–1975) (Thompson 1991). This included the codification of the rights and role of the civil servant as a proper and responsive servant to the elected minister in the *Public Service Act 1999* (Cth) and individual performance management (MacDermott 2008). The extent of these reforms' neutralising of the civil service and civil servants from political activity can be seen in the recent High Court of Australia decision of *Comcare v Banerji* [2019] HCA 23 where it was held that a civil servant could be dismissed for posting to social media commentary critical of the Coalition government's asylum seeker policies under an alias and outside of work time (Cornish and Tranter 2019, 27–28). Indeed, *Yes M/PM*, in portraying the 'democratic deficit' of the traditional Westminster civil service, has been criticised as an ideological show that justified neoliberal public sector reform (Borins 1988).

*Yes M/PM* has become the touchstone for a small, boutique tradition of televised political 'realist' satire. It was remade in India as *Ji Mantriji* (2001) and had a disappointing short-lived reboot in 2013. More well-known are the comedies developed by Armando Iannucci, *The Thick of It* (2005–2012) for the BBC and *Veep* on HBO (2012–2019). Inspired by the form of *Yes M/PM*, both were satires of the machinery of government. However, the dualism in *Yes M/PM* between the politician and the civil service is rendered more complicated. Tracking the changes to the civil service (which *Yes M/PM* in part contributed to) and the increasing concern with media and image management, both shows present a more contested political zone at the upper echelons of the executive where politicians have to navigate, not only departmental managers, but lobbyists and the powerful party spin doctors and image managers (Basu 2014; Kanzler 2019).

*The Hollowmen* was not simultaneous with either *The Thick of It* and *Veep*, although it can very much be seen as akin to those shows as a post-*Yes M/PM* 'realist' satire on the contemporary workings of government. Developed by the long-standing comedy team of Working Dog, the show shares the more subtle, dry Australian wit that is evident in some of their more well-known work such as *The Castle* (1997). Told through the mockumentary, fly-on-the-wall style, the twelve episodes of *The Hollowmen* (two seasons of six episodes) follow the trials of senior political advisors from the fictional Central Policy Unit (CPU) within the Office of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and traditional civil service leadership from the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. Like *Yes M/PM*, this projection of the centre of power is still portrayed as the male domain and, also like *Yes M/PM*, what is represented are two sides. The party political operators personally responsible to the unnamed and never screened Prime Minister are represented by the Prime Minister's Principal Private Secretary, Tony (Rob Sitch) (a political appointment and not the innocent career public servant Bernard Woolley played by Derek Fowlds in *Yes M/PM*), David 'Murph' Murphy (Lachy Hulme), Senior Political Advisor and Director of the CPU and Ian (Neil Melville), the Prime Minister's Chief of Staff. Representing the established bureaucracy are the Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Phillip (David James) and the Department's Under-Secretary Warren (Stephen Hall) who continually strive to uphold the traditional Westminster civil service values of process, deliberation and 'independence'.

Superficially, the arrangement of political operators and civil servants in *The Hollowmen* structurally resembles *Yes M/PM*. However, rather than the isolated, elected politician – in *Yes M/PM*, one of the early manipulations of Sir Humphrey was to dispose of Hacker's party-political advisor Frank Weisel (Neil Fitzwilliam) – there is a cabal of political appointees at the absolute centre of the Prime Minister's office outnumbering the career civil servants. In this emphasis on the politicisation of the upmost layer of government, the show also resembled *The Thick of It*. However, there are significant differences. The party-political monster Malcolm Tucker, played with attack eyebrows and angry expletives by Peter Capaldi, dominated *The Thick of It*. Tucker was brutal and unscrupulous, insulting, bullying and destroying the careers of ministers, civil servants and journalists. In Tucker, the hyper-frantic desperation to survive the 24-hour news cycle was materialised. *The Hollowmen* was cynical about the workings of contemporary government but less focused on the outrageous behaviour of dominating bullies like Tucker and Sir Humphrey. Rather than a single Machiavellian individual, *The Hollowmen*, true to its plural title, is concerned with representing two competing techno-political elites. Its more subtle humour comes from the presentation of the circulating of these two groups. In doing so it reveals an absence at the very centre of Australian public life; power has become reactive, conservative and impotent.

### Hollowmen and the Empty Centre

T. S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men* is a poem caught between movement and inertia (Urquhart 2001). There are travelling, circling motifs abutted with stillness and static such as from the 'prickly pear' to the 'shadow' (Eliot 1969 [1925], V, 1–8).

This dyad of movement and rest, the going round the prickly pear – something with particular significance in Australia with the legacy of the prickly pear invasion in the early twentieth century (Freeman 1992) – encapsulates the sense of circling in *The Hollowmen*. This is signposted immediately in the show's opening credits, a montage composed of clips of Canberra by car. The second stanza's conjuring of a shadow that is between idea and reality, motion and act, further suggests the emptiness that the show demarks through its movement.

*The Hollowmen* reveals two techno-political elites at the centre of Australian government: the political advisors preoccupied with the daily political cycle and image management and the civil servants with process and policy. What the show reveals is not *The Thick of It*'s level of conflict between these groups, but rather different rationalities leading to endless circling. It is not just politics triumphing over policy; rather 'all talk and no action' (S1E1 0:02:20). There are three examples from *The Hollowmen* that exemplify this. The first example is the blatant representing of political interests trumping sound policy reform. The second is not only politics over policy but also a suggestion that power lies elsewhere. The third is that in this vacuum all that seems to be left is self-aggrandisement.

The episode 'The Ambassador' (S1E2) is an inversion of the *Yes M/PM* episode 'Jobs for the Boys' (S1E7). Phillip, the Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, has prepared a comprehensive report recommending the de-politicisation of overseas diplomatic appointments. The 'Report into Selection Criteria for Overseas Diplomatic Postings – Towards a Professional Standards Framework' (0:04:41), to be released publicly in two weeks by Phillip at his keynote at a civil service dinner, limits overseas appointment to candidates with long-term civil service experience. While this reflects the Prime Minister's previous announced position of stopping 'clapped out party hacks from getting plum overseas appointments' (0:02:23), a problem for the government is that Senator Ron Engles (Billie Brown) has indicated a willingness to vacate his Senate seat for a suitable international posting. The political need of replacing Engles (as candidate for the ambassadorial appointment) becomes paramount. The episode turns into a run-about, with the advisors, principally Tony and Murph, failing to convince Engles to take another post and failing to shift Phillip, until they discover that plum overseas postings are considered late-career entitlements within the civil services as well as within parliament. Phillip is then presented by the advisors with a further 'fearless' plan of greatly reducing the number of Australian embassies, and with it the number of potential overseas appointments, as the next step from Phillip's own report. Phillip immediately agrees that his report requires more thought and that he can talk about something else at his keynote (0:01:10–0:1:30). The episode ends with Engles announcing to his wife to 'pack the fucking bags' (0:26:56). The episode has lots of movement, Phillip and Warren smugly moving around offices early in the episode

and clicking through detailed PowerPoint slides explaining the proposal, and the advisors travelling and talking around Canberra to Engles and retired diplomats, but ultimately the status quo endures.

'The Ambassador' reveals the modes of operation among the civil servants and the advisors. There is a difference. Phillip and Warren are precise, presenting an air of preparation and reasoned wisdom that reflects just how responsive they are to ministers under the *Public Service Act 1999* (Cth) (S10). Phillip and Warren have their coats on. Indeed, Phillip's speeches, early in the episode, resemble the silver tongue confidence of Sir Humphrey. The advisors are more frantic; there is a sense of adrenaline and urgency to their movements. Rob Stich's coatless Tony seems to have a perpetual aura of sweat. In the 'The Ambassador', the advisors 'win' but only to ensure the perpetuation of insider, elite Canberra culture for the political and public sector communities. All the energy is used up to maintain the status quo.

In the episode 'Wonder Drug' there is change (S2E3). What is significant in this episode is that the vector of change is outside of the Canberra bubble of civil servants and political insiders (Deem and Tiernan 2019). The episode examines the politics of the Australian Pharmaceutical Benefit Scheme (PBS) that provides Commonwealth subsidies for medicines and the independent merits-based processes whereby pharmaceuticals are listed on the PBS. While simplified for television, the episode's outlining of the PBS process is broadly representative (Sykes 2008). In 'Wonder Drug', nine months from the general election, a global pharmaceutical company has applied for a new Type 2 Diabetes drug 'Insuleze', endorsed by no less a person than Oprah, to be listed on the PBS. Immediately, the advisors are worried about the political influence of the drug company and run around trying to find evidence to support the listing of 'Insuleze' without directly interfering in a process that Phillip and Warren smilingly keep reminding them is independent and evidence-based. Indeed, the civil servants suggest a more proactive, interventionist health policy towards Type 2 Diabetes through promotion of lifestyle and healthy eating. Even among the advisors, Murph expresses sympathy with maintaining the integrity of the process and the wisdom of a more holistic, less pill-based approach. Tony, terrified from the opening scene of 'Wonder Drug' (S2E3), will have none of it:

...people should be allowed to do what they want. And the medical fraternity comes up with a pill to fix that abuse and the government pays. It is called the circle of life. Abuse. Pill. The government pays. A Hakuna Matata. The Circle of Life (0:14:12–0:14:23).

Mid-episode, the PBS committee announces the decision that the advisors feared, finding 'Insuleze' a second-rate drug and refusing listing. The show then jumps forward two weeks revealing the Prime Minister and government under siege. Talk-back radio callers are demanding of the Prime Minister why he will not fund such a wonder drug; there is a television commercial of a war veteran unable to play with his grandchild because the decision is denying him life-changing medication, and in parliament the opposition is having a field day in question time. The threat of big pharma, feared by the advisors, has eventuated. In crisis meetings the advisors hit on a plan to subsidise the drug outside of the PBS process through a 'trial' until the election. The drug company has won. 'Insuleze' will be subsidised in Australia. Tony confusing the titles of songs from *The Lion King* is telling. 'Hakuna Matata', a phrase he repeats several times in the episode, does not mean circle of life; rather it is a Swahili phrase meaning 'no worries' or 'no trouble' (Muhlberg 2019). Exactly what the advisors try to achieve throughout the episode.

'No trouble' is also the summary of what was achieved in the pilot episode 'Fat Chance'. Ambushed and flustered by a caller during a talk-back radio appearance, the Prime Minister hastily adlibs that his government is 'about to announce' new measures to address obesity (0:01:40). This generates a positive news momentum (0:04:20–0:04:33) leading the advisors to announce a 'National Childhood Obesity Offensive' while the civil servants are 'chomping at the bit' for real long-term policy, though recommending an 18-month interdepartmental taskforce to develop it. There is a sense of progress with a montage of Murph meeting with health and child welfare stakeholders and formulating a six-point plan involving restrictions on advertising targeted at children, a sugar tax, and stronger food health labelling. This positive experience leads Murph to be somewhat bewildered, and to ask 'why do these things never get up?' (0:16:20).

Enter the peak body Nutrient Food Council of Australia and with it the National Party Director Geoff (Graeme Blundell), who arrives in Canberra for an emergency Saturday morning meeting with the Prime Minister. Of all the characters in *The Hollowmen*, Geoff is the closest to Tucker from *The Thick of It*. He lambasts Tony:

For fuck sake why did you have to pick on food? I have 17 messages just this morning and they are all donors. If you told me a week ago that you could have come up with a policy that could piss off every media owner in the country, I would have said no way ... You do not take responsibility for children that is what fucking parents are for. What is wrong with sugar anyway?

I tell you what, when they become Prime Minister and they think they can do what they like. Well, it's time for a fucking reality check. Then I am out here ... fucking clown (0:22:31–0:23:12).

Geoff provides that timely reminder of Australia's neoliberal polity, in that the state should not be interfering with our daily lives. In the aftermath of Geoff's visit, the advisors are seen 'regrouping' and 'fine tuning' the 'bold' six-point plan, developing a four-point plan that reduces the six-point plan to a weak two-point plan of a public awareness campaign and a voluntary code of conduct for the food industry (0:23:22–0:25:26). The civil servants are commissioned to implement

the 18-month interdepartmental task force, and junior staff at the CPU are shown explaining to the stakeholders what happened to their recommendations. Having skirted with trouble, the advisors have settled for talk, euphemisms for delay and no trouble.

In these three episodes from *The Hollowmen* the inert state is reinforced. The elites of the political advisors and the civil servants circle around the corridors and offices of Parliament House. There is talk and activity but little change. Policy is announced, modified and dispensed with on the run. For the advisors, selling the superficial message and political expediency are their lodestars. The techniques of spin, focus groups and media management are the primary skills on show. For the civil servants, a different set of technical attributes are presented. Phillip's and Warren's emphasis is in working within the machinery of government by being responsive through endless consultations, reports and presentations. Policy is process, precise, meticulous and time consuming, involving 'crossing the Ts and dotting the Is' (S2E3: 0:01:21). Notwithstanding these two groups of political elites with their demonstrated technical proficiencies, the Prime Minister's office, the apex of the government in the Westminster system, is shown as reactive and timid; party donors and big pharma dictate, and sensible proposals are dispensed with in moments of self-interest.

Indeed, the show seems to suggest that in this busy, hollow universe, the only thing that really matters is self-aggrandisement. In the 'Edifice Complex' (S2E2), the Prime Minister is dissatisfied that he is opening major arts infrastructure projects that were commissioned by his predecessor and makes it clear to the advisors that he wants a grand architectural legacy in Canberra. Realising that development in Canberra involves the National Capital Commission, the advisors have to work with Phillip and Warren. The episode then becomes a series of mismatched expectations. The advisors, channelling the Prime Minister, want a grand arts building within the core 'parliamentary triangle', while the Canberra resident civil servants see an opportunity for basic infrastructure. Indeed, their initial suggestion is a revamping of all of Canberra's roundabouts that will improve traffic flow for the next 40 years. This, public housing developments, an arts walk around Lake Burly Griffin and a national community arts program, are all rejected as not sufficiently architectural to match the Prime Minister's hubris. Around the Cabinet table after a Cabinet meeting, Phillip tries to remind the advisors that the Prime Minister's legacy emanates from the policies and decisions made every day in Cabinet: of policy over short-term politics as affecting the lives of Australians. Such sentiments are brushed aside by the advisors. The episode ends with the announcement of a large temporary exhibitions gallery with the only permanent feature a plaque memorialising the Prime Minister:

Ian: It's just an empty shell.

Tony: That certainly reflects the Prime Minister – I mean his take on the arts – you know what the arts is ... you know what arts becomes (0:25:50–0:25:53).

Tony's gaffe is a revealing summary of the show; an emptiness of substance surrounded by swirling, changing words disclosing pure self-interest.

### Shadows and Prickly Pears

As with *Yes M/PM* and *The Thick of It*, the overall messaging from *The Hollowmen* is problematic. In presenting the new techno-political elites of the advisors lurching from one short-term expediency to the next, beholden to entrenched power, and caring only about spin and massaging the message, the programme might be read as a romantic affirmation of the role and responsibilities of the civil service. Indeed, the generally calm, if somewhat pedantic, Phillip and Warren could be seen as the underdog heroes of the show, advocating for credible sounding policies and reforms directed to the common good. In this reading *The Hollowmen* rewrites *Yes M/PM*, with the civil servants as the adults in the room trying to keep the semblance of good government going within the vortex of the Prime Minister's office. There are enough suggestions that the civil service, although without the seemingly total monopoly on power presented in *Yes M/PM*, is the shadow government, trying to get things done, maintaining independent processes, appreciating and defending the legacy of government action in Australia. It is little wonder that the ABC, criticised in the Murdoch media as the station and agenda-setting organ for an insular intelligentsia (Sinclair 2017: 11), commissioned a show that arguably harks back to a pre-*Yes M/PM* period when government was in the hands of the suitably experienced and qualified. Such a reading is tantalisingly tempting but ignores the complexity of the show.

This complexity begins to be revealed in the younger, more idealistic character of Murph. Murph, as the director of the CPU, is positioned as caught between the two groups. He is often expressing the need for substance, to balance out Tony's excited rhetoric, and this leads him in several episodes to articulate values of process and independence that echo Phillip and Warren, and to present policy positions for the common good. However, the error of his ways often becomes evident and his creative energy becomes redirected to spin. Indeed, there seems to be a hierarchy of cynicism within the order of advisors, with the younger Murph as less cynical, compared with the middle-aged Tony's preoccupation with the Prime Minister's brand, and the older and brutal Prime Minister's Chief of Staff, Ian. There is a progression from the abstract shadows of policy and process to the prick(ly) power infested apparatchiks. The implication seemingly is a representation of the adage as to the corruption of power.

In Murph, the desirability of letting the civil service mandarins – with their technical discourses on the machinery of government – back into the command chair, seems to be reinforced. Yet this is not the whole message. The civil servants are not the saviours in exile. When Phillip and Warren are given a chance to influence power, the beneficiaries seem to

be other bureaucrats: the shoring up of more late-career diplomatic appointments or a quicker drive to work. As with the advisors, there is a lot of talk, and this talk seems to allow expeditious changes in position, underlying vested self-interest.

What the show presents is a disillusionment with self-serving elites. The behaviour of Tony and Ian, and at times Murph, is disingenuous and morally repugnant – in order to shore up their own political survival. Values and positions are reversed without much difficulty or ethical retrospection. The linguistic dexterity of euphemisms, spin and techniques of image and message management are deployed with consummate ease, but it's form over content. Tony raves about the National Childhood Obesity Offensive, not because of an interest in child health, but because of the positive sound bites and press coverage it is getting for the Prime Minister. The circling around in the 'Edifice Complex' is because Canberra has an oversupply of large cultural buildings; the announced gallery is purely for the gratification of the Prime Minister. However, this cynical exercise of power is also evident in civil servants. Although they present a different set of technical skills, there is still an excess of smooth words and circling, with claims to the common good becoming muted when faced with self-interest.

*The Hollowmen*, in projecting a cynical representation of two tribes of Canberra elites, anticipated the disillusionment in public institutions that has spread throughout the Global North. The show predates the 2016 US presidential election by eight years and also the revolving door of the Australian prime ministership that has seen six prime ministers since 2010 (Walsh 2019). Notwithstanding the dry humour, there is a profound nihilism emanating from the show that anticipates and reveals Trump-era disillusionment. *The Hollowmen* shows a system broken, and seemingly irretrievably so. There is no glimmer of hope for the possibility of governing in the common good. The civil servants will continue to smoothly circulate, and the advisors will jerkily oscillate from one imagined crisis to another. The institutions of capital, whether big pharma or big food, will buy or bully to their advantage. It presents a world that has nothing to do with everyday concerns of human life, of care and work, worry and joy.

In *Yes M/PM*, the democratic deficit identified the politician as the people's representative, hopefully able, as Hacker was in the later episodes, to occasionally tame the civil service and establish policies that benefit the common good. There is no such site for hope and redemption in *The Hollowmen*. Murph is a tragic character, though there are still glimpses that he believes public power can achieve positive change. In 'Wonder Drug', Tony and Ian let him witness the consequences of trying to maintain a healthy lifestyle policy against the might of big pharma. After a day, the polls, a disastrous interview by the Health Minister and embarrassing headlines targeting the Prime Minister have him readily trying to find a way to fund the drug. There is little doubt that over time Murph will grow into Tony and Tony will become Ian in a depressing succession of cynical, empty men at the apex of power. (Eliot 1969 [1925] 'The Hollow Men', I: 12)

While probably not the intention of the Working Dog team, the nihilism of *The Hollowmen* is disturbing to watch from the hindsight of the bizarre times of the Trump era. The show's laughing at self-absorbed elites doing nothing with power within a cauterized regime, presents a toxic bubble that begs to be burst. In doing so, the show gives representation to a constellation of anxieties about isolated, self-interested elites, media as spin and the irredeemably broken nature of politics that has fuelled populist tendencies over the past decade. It also, depressingly, projects that the circle dance, in the shadows, around the prickly pear, is fundamentally a game for men. *The Hollowmen*, with its closed elites, alienates the 'everyday' Aussie who over the 2010s would find political expression in a succession of populists, racist demagogues, and also women who would see their roles as limited to a media manager (Moffitt 2017) who is complimented as looking nice at functions, and secretaries whose names Tony continually mispronounces. There is no character within the show that could inspire belief and commitment to a life of public service, just a gaggle of the 'smartest guys in the room' (Hodges 2018) indulging in self-service. *The Hollowmen* is not *Parks and Recreation* (2009–2015), which presented in Leslie Knope (Amy Poehler) hope that a non-cynical political operative can play and win the game of politics for an inclusive, positive future (Engstrom 2013; Swink 2017).

Rather, *The Hollowmen* presents an empty centre. The techno-political elites are skilled in ensuring their political survival but have no heart. They might have been fun to laugh at in 2008, but through the rear-view mirror of the Trump era, the show seems to be a warning about a dead-end that Australian political life was heading towards. And in that, the show possibly represents a missed opportunity. Firmly located in the larrikin tradition of taking the piss out of personalities, the show presented the centre of Australia as inhabited by hollow men going round and round, but in doing so offered no potential mode of escape. In *Yes M/PM*, that escape was more 'democracy' in the form of a stronger political control over the civil service. In *Parks and Recreation*, it took the form of a strong, skilled political leader who had heart and cared. In *The Hollowmen*, the message seemed to be, when the laughing stopped, to either smash the system or just give up on the political. Ironically, rather than satirically, both sentiments entwined to produce the Trump era of hyper, uncivil, intractable political conflicts fuelled by false news and digital echo chambers within a body politic that expects the worst from its alleged leaders.

## Conclusion

This article argued that *The Hollowmen* reveals an empty centre within Australian public life delineated by the activity of techno-political elites at the heart of government. It presented power as an empty spinning dance of party advisors and civil servants. In doing so it revealed a stagnant state concerned with maintaining the status quo of corporate power and the personal self-interest of the elites. This depressing world of hollow men prefigured the alienation and resentment that has led liberal democracies in the Global North, including Australia, to populism and intolerance.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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