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## The Trollope of Australian telecommunications

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### Abstract

Trevor Barr's page-turner of a novel *Grand Intentions* tackles the ugly side of the neo-liberalism sweeping Australia in the 1990s and 2000s. It examines the privatisation of an incumbent telecommunications carrier, and the drastic impact of its imported US corporate culture on several individuals. He deploys a cast of plausible fictional characters while allowing the narrative to be driven by an echo of real events in the Australian telecommunications industry.

Just as Anthony Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* exposed the financial scandals of the British stock market in the 1870s, Trevor Barr's page-turner of a novel *Grand Intentions* (Barr, 2016 <sup>[5]</sup>) tackles the ugly side of the neo-liberalism sweeping Australia in the 1990s and 2000s.

The case study for Barr's novel is the privatisation of a government-owned carrier, Telco One, and the imposition of ruthless American corporate values on the culture of a 1980s-era Australian middle management and workforce. Like Trollope, Barr invents a cast of plausible fictional characters while allowing the plot to be driven in part by an echo of real events – in this case, the successive restructuring and privatisation of Telstra between 1991 and 2010, and its drastic impact on many individuals.

Barr brings to bear his extensive knowledge of the Australian telecommunications industry and its massive changes in those two decades. Telecoms industry insiders will delight in picking up the relationships between events in this parallel, fictional universe with those in the real world.

The book begins with the death of an asthmatic young man in country Victoria, after his parents were unable to use their phone to call for an ambulance. This mirrors the case of a real casualty in 2002, of huge concern then to the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO) and to Telstra's management.

Amongst other 'real world' industry events alluded to in *Grand Intentions* are the rising numbers of customer complaints with the TIO concerning mobile services (in particular, poor mobile coverage and bill shock), up until recent years; the contempt – or, at best, incredulity – articulated by US imports Sol Trujillo and Phil Burgess for Australia's competition and workplace regulations; the legendary success of the 'phone for everyone at affordable cost' campaign (better known as the Telecom 2000 project, commenced in 1975 and completed by 1990); and the closing down of Telstra Research Laboratories in 2006, after 83 years of service as a national resource of in-depth technical expertise on telecommunications.

These incidents from the 'real life' of Australia's telecommunications industry, condensed into perhaps three years in the fictional world of this novel, draw the reader into a narrative which seems to have two major underlying motivations.

The first aim appears to be to capture the flavour of the cultural clashes in the 1980s and 1990s between Telecom Australia's (and its successor Telstra's) dominant engineering culture ('build it and they will come') and the pro-customer initiatives introduced by some of its executives and staff.

The cultural contrasts concerning the priority of 'the customer' must have been palpable to the author, Trevor Barr, as the external Co-Chair of the Telstra Consumer Consultative Council for several years. The imprints of his personal experiences are evident throughout the novel, most strikingly in his choosing to list all the members of his fictional Telco One Consumer Council, complete with their organisational affiliations, on p.106 of his book!

But where the novel gains its real narrative excitement is in capturing the much more lethal culture clashes – in career terms – between the brutal US corporate culture of the Trujillo 'three amigos' regime at Telstra, and the traditional Telecom-era culture. The latter can be characterised (by one who lived through it) as being marked notably by two-way loyalty between management and workers, longevity of tenure, teamwork across the organisation, and putting greater priority on serving the national interest than on maximising short-term commercial returns, e.g. by cross-subsidising new network infrastructure to achieve maximum national coverage. (Again, to be fair, Trujillo did as much as any of his predecessors in prioritising national infrastructure investment, in his investment in mobile network technology - as reflected in this novel.)

*Grand Intentions* introduces dramatic tensions between a minority of independent-minded Telco One Board members, especially in the character of lawyer Jennifer Ralston, and those captivated by the new American CEO, Clint Mason, most prominently the Chairman, Nathan Thompson. It must be said that the character of Clint Mason has little in common with the flamboyant Sol Trujillo; nor is there any character based upon Trujillo's colourful amigo Phil Burgess, a truly Falstaffian figure, to pep up the plot. And several of the industry events echoed in the novel pre-dated Trujillo's arrival in Australia by several years, some belonging to the less turbulent era of Frank Blount, Telstra's first American CEO – and even before then.

The more important example of the clash between US-corporate versus Aussie-cultures is given a slow fuse, in the character of Max Groves, a somewhat anarchistic and charismatic community organiser introduced in chapter 4. The potential conflict between Max and Clint's values is evident from the beginning, and is cleverly developed throughout the novel, with a satisfying explosive denouement near the end.

Let me return to my analogy with Anthony Trollope – the most prolific author to have ever served as an employee of the British Post Office. Trollope was a very successful writer in his day (the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century), not for great eloquence of literary style but for his ability to develop compelling dramas from the everyday events in institutional life. He introduced his readers to the arcane politics of the Church of England in the *Barsetshire Chronicles*, and to the shocking world of London's ruthless financiers and their dupes in *The Way We Live Now*.

In a similar way, Trevor Barr has used his extensive knowledge of the Australian telecommunications industry to dramatically highlight some events occurring over two decades in the progressive privatisation and restructuring of Telstra – condensed to some three years in this novel. The characters and plot he has invented will of course fascinate all telecoms industry insiders.

The more interesting question is whether this novel will attract a broader group of readers. The book will interest some as a rare literary case study of the ugly side of the neo-liberalism that has swept through Australia, and through most of the English-speaking world, since the 1980s. Because a central concern of the novel is for the innocent victims of corporate change who 'get in the way'.

But to others, it will probably be enjoyed as quite an exciting novel, in which personal relationships and careers are torn asunder – or deftly manage to survive – under the intense turmoil of corporate change.

## References

Barr, T. (2016). *Grand Intentions*. Melbourne, Australia: Sid Harta Publishers

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