

Frank Moorhouse Address

This event makes literary history – it is the first time that an author has ever seriously felt that he or she does not deserve a prize, is unworthy of an award. I was happy to receive the Henry Lawson Prize when young writer, I was happy about the Miles Franklin, but the PEN/Thomas Keneally Prize – maybe not.

You see before you the first public example of a humble author.

Seriously, I am humbled and I did have serious reservations about accepting this award. And I think most of you here tonight would understand why.

At first I felt that I should not accept it given that it was awarded last year to Joesoef Isak in recognition of his long record of courageous publishing during the years of the Suharto dictatorship in Indonesia. Joesoef Isak is not just a courageous publisher, he is one of Indonesia's finest intellectuals who has been at the forefront of a cultural guerrilla war to win back for Indonesians their freedom of expression.

He spent many years in gaol without charge or trial and did many courageous things during his life.

And usually we think of this sort of award going to an author in a more dangerously repressive country and not to a privileged Australian whose last book was *Martini: a Memoir*.

But after talking to my advisors, I decided to accept it with the humility that good sense and reality demands of a privileged Australian who has lived well and most of the time in political security.

I decided that it was also appropriate to accept it because of the times and of the issues which I have described in the essay in the *Griffith Review* "A Writer in a Time of Terror".

And by the way I wish to pay tribute to Julianne Schultz and the Griffith Review for giving me the resources and time and space to write this long essay.

I thought that it was appropriate to accept the award as a way of raising our awareness about freedom of expression -- as a pointer to what is happening in our superficially politically safe country. It is prudent to be alert to the troubling shifts and changes in our own freedom. And there have been such troubling shifts and changes to our freedoms over the last two or so years.

It is always good to keep an eye on what is happening around us, and to be aware of the deceptive safety of our democracy.

What is it that I wish to use this prize and this occasion to warn you about.

What do we have going on here? Security agencies visit and arrest a man in a room writing an essay and putting it on the net: a well-known book and magazine publisher, a university professor, and a documentary film maker have their computers 'cleansed' by the security agencies; a man charged with nothing is threatened if he publishes a book; a radio station has a tape seized; young demonstrators are threatened under the sedition act; a well-known satirist has his website closed down; women outside a prison are frightened about "saying too much"; a former Guantanamo Bay detainee who was released and charged with no offence says he is approached by two ASIO agent who tell him that he is speaking out too much'; attempts are made to stop ex-army officers and ex- Office of National Assessment officers from writing books; students are questioned about what books they are reading and borrowing; books are banned against much legal and other advice from the Federal Police and the Director of Public Prosecutions; the offices of the editor of the Australian newspaper and a senior reporter are searched by ASIO; the Attorney-General moves the formerly independent censoring agencies into his department. These are some of the 20 or more infringements of freedom of expression here in Australian in the last 2 years.

The government's Security Legislation Review committee is alarmed that the Attorney-General wants to further restrict free speech; the Law Reform Committee is alarmed about the legislation restricting freedom of expression; The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission has expressed concern; every media and arts organization is alarmed; every organization of lawyers has expressed concern.

“Nervous about saying much?” I thought to myself. “This is not the sort of society I want to live in.”

The most saddening of the sixteen incidents I look at in the essay. Alli Barnard 19 years old first demo, a very promising young writer:

It was a very dismal turnout. Maybe twenty or so. The speakers at the demonstration were those friendly, passionate people who are often in danger of alienating regular people with a holier-than-thou attitude. They planned to have someone dressed up as John Howard getting into a bed together with someone wearing a Kerry Packer mask, but it was too hot to wear the suits.

After some songs and speeches, the sound system was confiscated without provocation or explanation. Later the police claimed it was an illegal amplification system and made the ridiculous and unsubstantiated claim that this calm little group was causing offence to members of the public. With nothing else to do, the protesters decided to march on the Opera House.

Suddenly there were flocks of police, a couple of mounted police, whose horse were looking extremely hard done by, and a few of paddy wagons rocked up to join the fun. We were informed our protest was illegal – holding signs in this area was now illegal.

“We have the right to protest. It’s a public place,” the protesters said. “This area has been rezoned, under the new sedition laws you aren’t allowed to be here,” a police officer said.

“Go or get in the back of the truck, those are the options for you. You don’t have the authority to have a peaceful protest. There was no application,” said another.

“It’s a free country!” we cried.

“Not any more sweetheart. Let me show you your tax dollars at work,” he said.

Yes, sure there are dangers on our horizon here in Australia but not as bad as a say Zimbabwe or Indonesia still or China or Russia.

But we must not let things drift; we must not give an inch on civil liberty or freedom of expression; we have to always resist those sorts of short cuts to security. The use of ruthlessness and inhumanity in the name of security is unacceptable.

Richard Evans in his 2005 book, *The Third Reich in Power* (Penguin) says something that I thought summarized the caution. Speaking of Germany in the mid

1930s he wrote, “increasingly rules were relaxed, laws dispensed with, scruples abandoned...”

I have in mind the abuse and misuse which occur when officials and others feel empowered by the expressed attitudes of political and media leadership (not only by legislation) – officious bureaucrats, security people, police officers, individual soldiers, prison guards, customs officials, airport security guards. These interfaces are fragile enough at the best of times.

If it is okay for officers of the federal Attorney-General’s Department or ASIO to raid bookshops and take over publishers’ computers and to question students about their reading matter, if it’s okay for airline passengers to be pushed around, then those prone to bigoted behaviour also feel so empowered and authorised.

We reduce abuse by putting in place legal procedures, by training, by selective recruitment to security agencies. But we do it most effectively when governments avoid blundering into the nerve centres of society, such as freedom of expression.

As I see it, the liberal democrat strives to prove and to establish that, as a society, we can survive, flourish and be safe and orderly while still holding to and maximising freedom of expression. To a degree, the defence of freedom of expression is a question of political judgement, aspiration and faith.

I therefore accept the Pen /Keneally Prize as a way of relighting it this year as a Burning Beacon for us all, readers and writers, reminding us to always be conscious of the dangers to freedom of expression even in what appears to be a politically safe democracy.