He chose the Left as his target

by Christopher Pearson

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Max Teichmann, one of Australia’s most incisive political commentators, died last Saturday in Melbourne, aged 84. His main claim to fame was as an astute observer and fearless critic of the institutional Left and its academic cheer squad. But boyhood memories of the Depression and his years lecturing in politics at Monash left him with few illusions about unbridled capitalism.

While he admired John Howard’s level-headedness and hadn’t voted for Labor federally since the early Hawke years, he was by no means a neo-con and never really embraced the Howard government’s agenda. It meant that his columns were often edgy and unpredictable.

Like most of the class of 1968, I had been reading him off and on since about 1975, when his pieces used to appear in Nation Review. In those days he was a passionate Whitlam supporter and wrote ringing rhetorical denunciations of the governor-general, John Kerr, and his “constitutional coup d’état”. But even while Teichmann was a prominent guru of the radical Left, he had begun to despair at its methods of enforcing the party line and to be assailed by doubts about the socialist project generally and about the ALP’s local version of “gas and water socialism”.

Milovan Djilas first sowed the seeds of doubt. He was a Partisan leader and litterateur who rose to be vice-premier of Yugoslavia and Josip Broz Tito’s heir apparent. He wrote a number of papers highly critical of the party in 1954, which led to his summary sacking, and a book published in America in 1957 under the title *The New Class*, which led to his imprisonment. Djilas already had enormous authority as the propaganda chief responsible for promoting Tito’s dissident version of communism with a human face, which was only enhanced by his insider’s critique of how Yugoslav communism actually operated. A mixed economy run for the most part on command economy lines was a recipe for disaster.

He also warned that the revolution was betraying its egalitarian ideals and everywhere entrenching a nomenklatura, a corrupt, self-perpetuating oligarchy. His dealings with Joseph Stalin led him to see very clearly the logical consequences of “the dictatorship of the proletariat”, three full decades before most of the Australian academic Left.

Some refractory intellectuals, including the more libertarian members of the Sydney Push, had begun to talk in the ’50s about sociologists with a sceptical view of communist man. Vilfredo Pareto had theorised about the ways in which every society becomes stratified so that it delivers economic power and privilege to elites. Robert Michels’s
“iron law of oligarchy” reinforced the point that human nature will always subvert millennial fantasies about equality. The startling thing about Djilas was that he wasn’t conjecturing with theoretical models but reporting first-hand on revolutionary experience. Self-respecting scholars in the social sciences could no more disregard his courageous analysis than the evidence of the gulag. Teichmann’s mounting impatience with colleagues who turned a blind eye to both gave way in the end to Swiftian disgust and revenge in the form of satire.

From the mid-’90s until the magazine changed hands in 2002, he was a regular columnist with The Adelaide Review. He also wrote articles for Quadrant after Robert Manne resigned from the editorship and for the National Civic Council’s News Weekly. Present Quadrant editor Keith Windschuttle rated his contribution highly. “Max had a very attractive combination of a generous heart and a razor-sharp mind. He had once been on the Left of politics but eventually became one of the Left’s most effective critics. It was his writings over the decades that, perhaps more than those of any other single person, helped me grow up intellectually. He spoke to me in a way that other conservative intellectuals in Australia, such as Bob Santamaria, never could.

“Max had a lot of fun writing articles exposing the cant and hypocrisy of left-wing thinking. He did not do this because he hated the Left but rather because he loved its ideals. However, he also understood humanity well enough to know that great ideals could never overcome the animal spirits that sent people chasing power and status at any cost.

“Max’s critique — one that’s more often encountered in the US than in Australia — focused on how socialists so easily turned into authoritarians whenever they gained power. He knew, however, that this trait was not just confined to the Left and was part of the human condition. He focused on left-wing politics because he knew them best and was always fascinated by their intricacies.

“In January I asked him to write an overview of the sociological phenomenon known in communist countries by Djilas’s term ‘the new class’ and in the West as ‘the long march through the institutions’. Sick as he was, he agreed with enthusiasm, but sadly the grim reaper got him before he could finish it.”

John Ballantyne, the editor of News Weekly, went to extraordinary lengths to make sure Teichmann was a regular fixture in his pages. “Max was always the first column people turned to when they picked up the magazine. His insights into life and people, and his entertaining and trenchant writing style, not to mention his sheer wealth of knowledge, made him compelling reading. A great part of his appeal was his fearless independence of mind, a rare commodity at any time, but particularly today.

“As far as I’m aware, Max never mastered the typewriter. Instead he hand-wrote all his articles for News Weekly, then took a taxi to our Melbourne office and dictated his column to me. That of course was when he was well enough to get around. In the last two years he was housebound with worsening emphysema and swollen legs. However his mental powers remained undiminished. The time it took to put his material together — taking his dictation, checking spellings, making the odd correction — was well worth
Max’s conversation, like his writing style, was fresh, original and uproariously funny.”

Because work hardly ever took me to Melbourne in the mid-’90s, I developed a number of more or less exclusively telephonic friendships with distinguished Melburnians, including Santamaria, the historian Austin Gough and my newly recruited columnist. It was in 1998 over lunch at the Latin Restaurant — for nearly 40 years a favourite haunt of the NCC — on the day of Santamaria’s funeral that we finally met face to face. Tony Abbott, a long-term protege of Santa’s, joined us.

Teichmann was dressed like a pensioner down on his uppers, which wasn’t far from the truth, and he had a homely, Saxon peasant face. But the lasting impressions were of his grasp of the deceased’s role in the new conservative cultural resurgence, his animated conversation, the impersonations of a maverick comrade-in-arms, Frank Knopfelmacher, the gusto with which he attacked the roast suckling pig and his hourly forays into the street to smoke a cigarillo.

A year later, the present Speaker of the South Australian parliament, Jack Snelling, and I were in Melbourne for the annual conference of the Ecclesia Dei Society, which promotes the classical Latin rite. He was then a conservative Labor backbencher, an occasional reader of *News Weekly*, a fan of Teichmann’s columns and the society’s president. I was the conference’s keynote speaker, having recently been received into the Catholic Church. Dinner at the Latin was the obvious thing to do.

Teichmann spoke briefly and quite matter-of-factly that night about envying people who could make their peace with the church and said he hoped that one day he could return, even if only as some sort of fellow traveller, to the High Church Anglicanism of his youth. Then he changed the subject and told us all he knew about the NCC’s extensive Asian and central European intelligence networks, matters covered in fascinating detail in Patrick Morgan’s survey of Santamaria’s correspondence, *Your Most Obedient Servant* (The Miegunyah Press).

Although religion never came up in our later conversations and encounters, it’s worth noting that the people looking after him all agreed that he had a splendid disregard for death and, after a day attached to his oxygen mask, would often insist on half a cigar. At his request he was buried on Friday after a service at St Peter’s Eastern Hill, Melbourne’s Anglo-Catholic bastion. A member of the parish staff said he wasn’t sure whether Teichmann came for anything more than the music in the last years when he was still mobile, but favourite pieces of Bach, Handel and Purcell were chosen for the occasion.

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