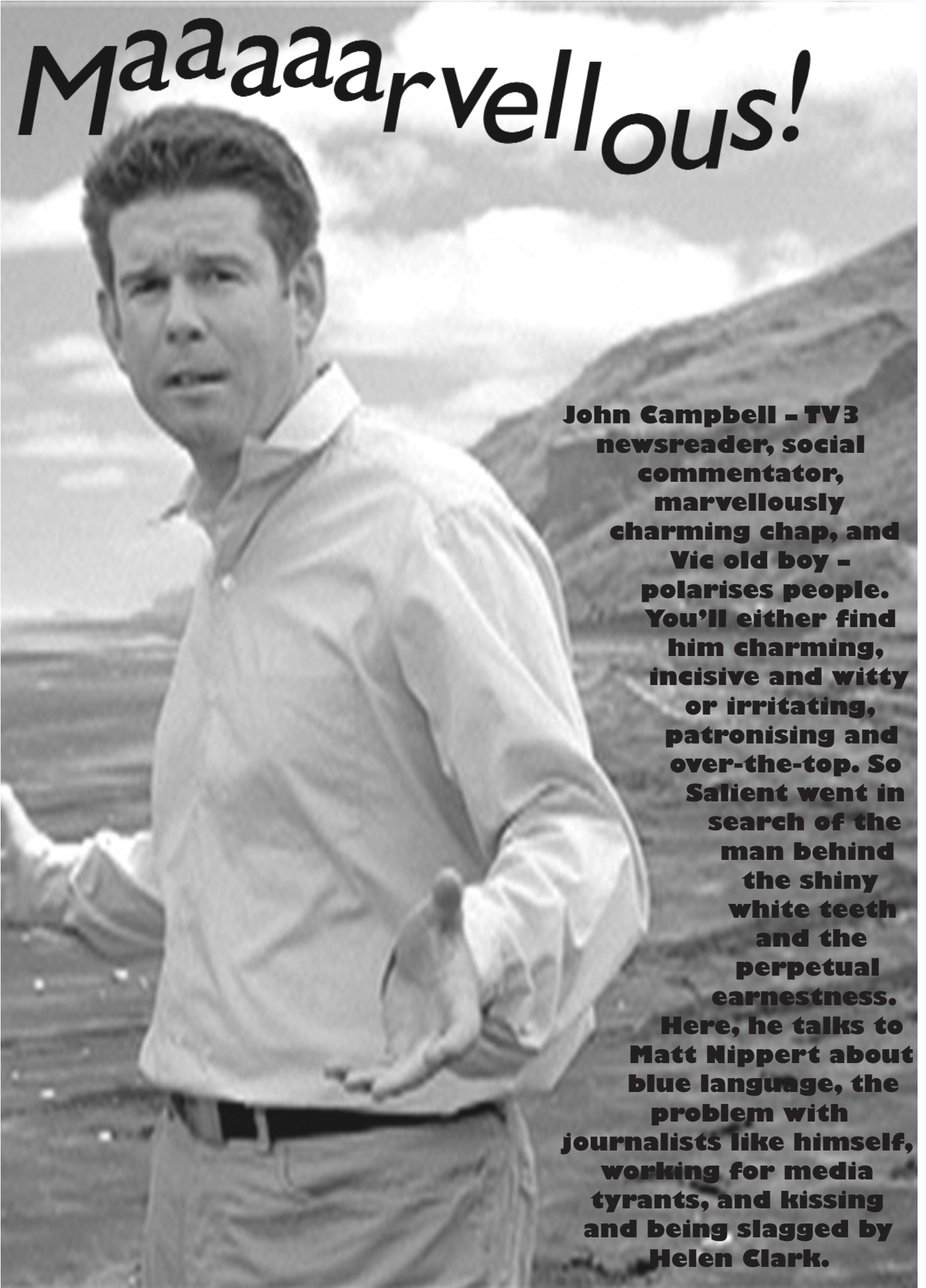


Maaaaarvellous!



John Campbell - TV3 newsreader, social commentator, marvellously charming chap, and Vic old boy - polarises people. You'll either find him charming, incisive and witty or irritating, patronising and over-the-top. So Salient went in search of the man behind the shiny white teeth and the perpetual earnestness. Here, he talks to Matt Nippert about blue language, the problem with journalists like himself, working for media tyrants, and kissing and being slagged by Helen Clark.

CAMPBELL WAS A STUDENT at Victoria during the early 80s, heady days when the Springbok Tour and anti-nuclear movements reached their zenith. New Zealand's 'summer of love' had taken a decade-long detour somewhere over the Pacific.

Yet you would not have found Campbell knee-deep in parties, protest or politics during this time. In fact, he kept to himself: 'I didn't like to get noticed – it's funny, given where I've ended up.

'I've never been wild. When I was in varsity I didn't wear a tie, but I think you'll find if I could have got away with it, I would have. During my university days, I didn't like to draw attention to myself in any way, and so I wore a pair of pretty conservative jeans and a sensible shirt.

'Jesus!' Campbell exclaims wryly as he drags the dress sense of his youth over the harsh coals of hindsight, 'I should've been flogged.

'I am a product of the Wellington middle class who in some respects, while they claim to be terribly liberal, are in fact the most conservative people on earth. There are religious fundamentalists in Utah who are in fact wilder and braver and more outrageous than the Wellington middle classes of Kelburn and Wadestown. They wear a uniform for God's sake. And I wore it, and I still do.'

Of his student life, Campbell views up his experience as one of opportunities not fully seized: 'I paddled rather than dived in, if you

'I wish I'd taken more risks. Got drunk more often, taken more drugs. I wish I'd been a braver younger person.'

know what I mean. It was a really good period of my life, and I wish I'd not taken things quite so seriously in some respects, and taken things more seriously in others. I wish I'd taken more risks. Got drunk more often, taken more drugs. I wish I'd been a braver younger person. I've always suffered from a timidity, and it seems to me that if you are ever going to not suffer from a timidity, then it's when you're at university that you should really give that a go.

'I was a daydreamer, slightly socially awkward and full of great ideals about making the world a better place – and an endless, boring small circle of friends with them.

Campbell graduated from Victoria with an honours degree in English Literature, a subject he still gushes over: 'I *loved* English Literature, I just loved it! I was a student of varying ability. Sometimes I was bloody awful, but from time to time, when something captured my imagination, I wrote well and thought well.

'All I studied was literature really. I did Classics and I did Russian and I did Women's Studies, but just so that I would do the literature in those disciplines.'

His appreciation of the wider humanities is also apparent. Asked whether the drive to focus education more on Biotechnology, IT and Engineering should be at the expense of the Humanities, he vociferously argues that, 'The humanities, that's [where] we're at our best. That's when we get it right, or at least try to get it right ... Jesus, we need the humanities more than ever, I think.

'If you walk up to someone on the street and say: "name the ten greatest people in history", no buggar is going to name an accountant and it's highly unlikely that anyone other than a lawyer is going to name a lawyer. They're going to be musicians and artists and writers and scientists perhaps.'

During his time at Vic he involved himself in Radio Active, a move that propelled him into journalism: 'Had I not done student radio I wouldn't be doing what I am now.'

Known on-air as Sparky Plug, he gained notoriety for running alternative rugby commentaries during test matches that he freely admits were '*unbelievably* rude' and grossly defamatory.

'We also did a show called "The Joy of Knowledge" in which

we'd explain ... things about which we knew absolutely nothing. I think when we explained religion it was the single most offensive hour in the history of all radio networks ever, anywhere. There was no group of religious people that we didn't truly insult.'

Asked if he missed the days when he could say what he wanted, free of editorial influence, the Broadcasting Standards Authority, and the threat of defamation, he indicates some wisp of nostalgia: 'I do miss the opportunity. But, quietly, I do kind of say what I want to say now. I don't swear anymore, because you can't get away with that on television, and I don't do it as often as I like. From time to time ... it all comes blurring out.'

Campbell's politics may be pink, but his language is certainly of a bluer shade. During a twenty-minute interview his language was peppered with blasphemy and swearing, 'fuck' and 'Jesus' making six appearances each. Interestingly, his conversation became most profane when discussing politics, especially when discussing the Labour Government of Helen Clark.



THE KNOWLEDGE WAVE Conference, Auckland. Campbell has been appointed MC for the Emerging Leader's forum, which has brought together 100 young people to contribute their ideas and perspectives on the future of the nation. Later, they mix with the elites of the New Zealand political and business establishment.

'Jesus!' Campbell exclaims wryly as he drags the dress sense of his youth over the harsh coals of hindsight, 'I should've been flogged.'

The first speakers at the forum talk of 'reducing compliance costs, more efficient tax regimes', and 'end Treaty grievances'. During the main Conference there are calls to privatise social welfare, go to war against 'medieval religious fundamentalists', and 'not let concerns for equity cloud the drive for efficiency'. Hardly a comfortable place for a self-confessed 'liberal leftie tosspot'.

Asked whether he felt any queasiness about participating in an exercise antithetical to his political beliefs, Campbell is emphatic in his need to be there: 'The Left doesn't do anything, especially under a Labour Government. That's why I'm here, we need to discuss our future. Criticise the Right all you want, but at least they fucking do something.'

A dinner is held in a marquee tent at the Viaduct Basin. The mood amongst most is sombre, Team New Zealand 2-0 down at this point, an outcome not hoped for by the organisers who use words 'vision,' 'passion,' and the 'Kiwi edge' in every second sentence.

After drinks and dinner, Campbell introduces Nesian Mystic, who are about to take the stage. He talks of a school fair in Western Springs, where a sea of schoolchildren swamped a free concert. He talks eloquently of how he was 'blown away', and how he subsequently arranged for them to perform at the Conference.

Lead vocalist Awanui Reeder begins by paying a compliment to

where the future is *less* discussed than in New Zealand.' He hopes that the Conference can 'transcend political ideologies and unmandated experiments'. Direct, negative, reference is made to the government reforms of the 80s and early 90s.

'There are religious fundamentalists in Utah who are in fact wilder and braver and more outrageous than the Wellington middle classes of Kelburn and Wadestown. They wear a uniform for Gods' sake.'

The next day during the keynote speech, Helen Clark echoes his sentiments: 'We do not accept the unspoken agenda behind so

much of the rhetoric about the need for vision, leadership, and change. Decoding that rhetoric generally reveals discredited and discarded agendas of the 1980s and 1990s which produced growing inequality, social fragmentation and despair ... The pace of change in those years may have been exciting for some economic elites, but they were simply terrifying to many in broader society.'

Campbell and Clark may agree on general political issues, but they cannot be said to get along. And Campbell reckons this is the way it has to be from now on.

'BEFORE I REALLY

pissed her off, I used to bump into Helen Clark in the Maidment, a theatre in Auckland, or whatever social gathering we had, and we would call each other by our first names, we would have a little kiss on the cheek. It was an



Front: Awanui Reeder, lead singer for Nesian Mystic:
'John Campbell taught us heaps about rapping.'

the man who brought them here. 'John Campbell taught us heaps about rapping.' Nesian Mystic kick off with the old Kiwi classic *Ten Guitars*. It is not a conventional take, not as experimental as Deja Voodoo's pyrotechnical *Ten Guitars of Death*, but beatboxing provides the entire rhythm section and it's an infectious performance. During their set Reeder gets down on the floor for some acrobatic breakdancing at Campbell's feet. Campbell positively glows.

The Pacific quintet are a hit, delegate Oliver Driver later saying it was a shame that 'the most inspiring leaders I have met so far were considered the entertainment'.

(Campbell writes a column in *Rip It Up*. 'I'm working out how to write about music without sounding like a sad old fart or without sounding like I'm trying to get down with the kids.'

Without prompting he asks how Trinity Roots and Rhombus are doing down in Wellington. Add in his ties to Nesian Mystic, and he's not doing too bad a job of getting down with this particular kid.)

Formal speeches eventually begin. My vision obscured by the PA, I can only watch his shadow speak. His black outline is animated on the exterior wall, hands gesticulating what are obviously heartfelt views. 'It's hard to imagine a Western democracy

unbelievably cosy relationship.'

What really pissed Clark off, what caused her to publicly call Campbell a 'little creep', was the release of a book *Seeds of Distrust*, by Nicky Hager, and a follow-up interview by Campbell. Clark was questioned on a range of very specific policy decisions made concerning potentially GE-contaminated sweetcorn. The trembling close-up rage of Clark, the accusations and denials, as reality television it was high drama:

Clark: 'Stop haranguing me.'

Campbell: 'I am not haranguing you.'

When the *New Zealand Herald* gave awards for the 2002 elections, Corngate gained a dishonourable mention:

'Biggest 48-hour wonder. Nicky Hager's *Seeds of Distrust* book, aka Corngate, which exploded in the middle of the campaign like a neutron bomb. Two days later the smoke cleared. Everyone was still standing (except maybe TV3's John Campbell).'

The front page of the *Herald* following the interview read: 'PM Fury at GE Ambush', an approach Campbell describes as 'crap journalism'. Both Campbell and Hager agree that the drama of Campbell and Clark clashing became the story.

Hager: 'The story was about the "little creep" and how angry

Helen Clark was at him for doing the interview, which frankly was shameful journalism. It was astounding that she could divert and capture the audience that much. Even if it had been bad tactics on his part, it shouldn't have been so dominant.

'I think, and probably John thinks, that he could have handled the interview slightly differently. Basically he pushed her too hard, he felt as though she wasn't telling the truth, and so kept pushing

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her. And to an ordinary person watching it seemed as though she was being hassled, and they would have felt sorry for her.'

Campbell agrees, feeling that his approach detracted attention from the investigative work of Hager: 'It was a really sobering experience for me because Nicky's work got kind of buried a bit because I was a bloody "little creep".'

Campbell expressed concern to the *New Zealand Herald* soon after the Corngate interview that if 'ambushing', or not informing an interviewee of questions before they are asked, was not allowed, 'we will never see a politician caught out, we will never see candid, revealing interviews with politicians. We will only ever see spin.'

It remains to be seen how the fallout from Corngate will affect the media relationship between the executive and the media. However, it is interesting to note that Corngate was probably the only unscripted moment of Labour's 2002 election campaign.

Reflecting one year on, Campbell admires the damage control of the Labour machine: 'Fuck they did a great job. They got away with it. And unfortunately, unwittingly, I played quite a large role in that. [I was] the person who everyone discussed whether my conduct was acceptable, as opposed to whether [the Government's] conduct was acceptable.'

'PEOPLE HAVE CRITICISED me for Corngate, and for alienating the Prime Minister. In fact the criticism I am due is for how entirely cosy I was with this government. That's where I let people down. Jesus, I was pulling my punches. I've got a lot more in common with this government than I've got with a National government, that's the bloody failing. Taking the Government on isn't a failing, being rude to government isn't a failing. [Journalists] being bloody friendly with them is. The problem is that the liberal leftie tosspots like me ... are now rising to positions of seniority in New Zealand journalism, like this Government. That's bad news.'

The lack of public debate during the current reign of the Labour Government is a major concern for Campbell, a problem he believes has its roots in people like himself: 'We're [the media] not holding the Labour Party to account the same way we held the National Party to account, and we should be.'

The problem can be characterised as a conflict of interest: 'Most journalists are of the liberal left, they're not storming the barricades of the left-wing, but they're sort of comfortable, chardonnay-drinking, liberal lefties. Unfortunately that's what this government is – and it's really hard to criticise.'

The lack of debate is obviously a hot-button issue for Campbell. He says the present situation is 'really bloody tragic, and it really fucking gets me going. The same thing happened in America when Clinton was elected. If we talk about the Labour Party in New Zealand and Britain, and the Democrats in the USA, they are more often than not in opposition, and therefore more often than not outside the establishment. When they become the establishment,

all their supporters, who for such a long time sat out in the cold, excluded from legislative power, are so delighted and so relieved and so overwhelmed to be having their turn that they seem intent on *just staying there*.

'What we see is a sort of abrogation of the ideals of the Left, which is passionate, heartfelt argument and debate ... Instead we have this mealy-mouthed focus-group bloody politics where the Left has become this touchy-feely group of people and wants to be all things to all people and it kind of doesn't believe in anything much anymore. All my mates would stand up and say "shit this is an awful government" when it was the National Party [in power]. But the same group of people now don't want to criticise the Labour Party because they're just so relieved to have Labour there. Well I'm sorry, but I think we have to set the bar a bit higher.'

AS A SELF-PROFESSED fan of John Pilger and Noam Chomsky, and presumably their critiques of media corporate misinformation, I ask Campbell if he sees any contradiction between holding these views and working for CanWest, a media corporate.

In 2002, CanWest fired Russell Mills, publisher of the *Ottawa Citizens*, allegedly for writing an editorial critical of Prime Minister Jean Chrétien. Soon after Mills was fired, CanWest decided to publish national editorials across their 12 largest metropolitan



dailies, a decision with clear implications for editorial independence.

Campbell acknowledges that the company which owns TV3 is hardly a candidate for a Free Press award: 'In Canada [CanWest]

'I'm in the belly of the beast.'

have done some really preposterous things in terms of demands upon their newspaper stable in respect to reporting on the Middle East. CanWest are owned by a Jewish family, and they are very pro-Israel.'

Campbell insists that these problems have not spread to New Zealand: 'That's never impacted on us in TV3 ... They've got no editorial control, they've never tried to [exert editorial control].'

'Absolutely, there are massive contradictions [between my personal beliefs and those of CanWest]... I'm the belly of the beast, but what else do I do?

'If you are to say "I can't work for anyone that Chomsky would find wanting" then it leaves you with about seven media

organisations on earth that you can work with ... I'm doing my best within the constraints of the journalist machine that operates at the moment, within the constraints of being the father of one and a half, within the constraints of having a mortgage, within the constraints

'Find me an objective journalist, and I find you a person who's not worth knowing as a human being.'

of not possibly being as brave as I should be. Unfortunately, it's the dichotomy between idealism and the real world. You've just got to try and bring idealism to the real world.'

It is telling that Campbell has clear plans for the future, one day hoping to be free of this dichotomy. 'The sort of journalism I'd like to do, I haven't really done yet ... I want to be sufficiently together within five or ten years to be a truly independent journalist, making documentaries or writing feature stories that I would be proud of.'

And what work would qualify for a place of pride in Campbell's eyes? 'Telling the truth, as opposed to simply repeating received wisdoms as most journalism does.'

'I'd like to be an essayist along the lines of a John Pilger, but who writes along the lines of a Joan Didion. I think she uses words

lead: 'On the one hand you want to tell this person to "fuck off", and then on the other hand you think "well no actually, this is admirable, and if they bring this sort of bloody-minded perseverance into their [craft] then they're going to be great".'

'Finally they turned up and I didn't really have a clue what they wanted of me. They were so obviously confident with what they wanted ... that it sort of happened around me. I kind of sat there, sometimes looking bewildered, sometimes acting bewildered, and most of the time being bewildered in some way.'

Despite insisting that 'it was my best role ever', he lost out on Best Actor to a guy called Potato Chips. Meek said it was not surprising considering that, 'Dunedin is a much harder competition than the Qantas Media Awards'. *Being John Campbell* won Best Video and Best Script, just reward for an ambitious project involving 25 hours of driving and the near-stalking of a public figure. Campbell reckons that Meek and Ong 'probably deserve a good thrashing first, but they'll go a bloody long way'.

PROBABLY THE MOST common criticism of Campbell is that his distinctive style breaks out of the mould of the 'objective, detached journalist'. He has been accused of being 'gushy', and injecting too much emotion into his reporting. According to Campbell the quest for objectivity is not only impossible, but also contrary to good journalism and the human condition: 'The only way a journalist can be truly objective is if they suspend *any human feelings*.'

'The problem is we've taught objectivity as it were a holy grail ... Name me an issue that people can be truly objective on. Politics? No. Sport? No. Whether or not we should bomb Iraq? No. US foreign policy? No. Every adult human being on the planet has an opinion about those things and so the issue is not whether you can be truly objective, the issue is whether you can tell the truth as well as you are able, which is quite a different thing from being objective.'

The drive for detached objectivity is a sort of false consciousness, according to Campbell: 'The problem with

objectivity is that it's only anti-establishment subjectivity that gets noticed. Pro-establishment subjectivity doesn't get noticed, they call that objectivity ... To wander round saying it exists is to allow people to get away with stuff. It's to allow people, usually who are championing the establishment or the status quo, to *pretend* they're objective – when in fact they're as subjective as your next person ... That's rooted in my opinion.

'I don't think [objectivity] exists. Find me an objective journalist, and I find you a person who's not worth knowing as a human being. Clearly they're not interested in anything, [a person] who has no passion, who obviously doesn't have sex, who doesn't love or hate. Jesus, we don't want people like that in journalism.'



just beautifully, I think the way she writes is extraordinary.'

A career in film may also beckon, if student film-makers continue to have their way...

AT THE 2002 MOTHTRAS, the Otago University student film awards, Campbell was in the running for Best Actor. He played a role in a film put together by a couple of Otago students, Arthur Meek and John Ong. Fans of *Being John Malkovich*, they had the audacious idea of producing a New Zealand version *Being John Campbell*.

'I didn't have any experience acting, but they were buggers and they just wouldn't take no for an answer.' Meek says it 'was an operation involving a lot of stealth. We knew a girl who worked part-time on the autocue, who chased him round with a script. We didn't even have to stalk him ourselves, there were heaps of other people willing to do it.'

The stubborn quest of Meek and Ong to see their cinematic vision to reality was not appreciated initially by their prospective