

A Worthwhile Research Program?

Geoff Stokes (ed.), *Australian Political Ideas*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 1994

Reviewed by David Walker and Struan Jacobs

AS Geoff Stokes suggests in his introduction to this eclectic anthology, the general history of Australian political thought has yet to be written; the process of sifting 'through the sources and . . . [analysing] in detail the . . . more systematic kinds of reflection about Australian politics' (p.1) has barely begun. One obvious reason for this neglect is the traditionally low estimation of Australian political thought, which W. K. Hancock and others denigrated as unoriginal and banal.

Naturally, the editor of *Australian Political Ideas* refuses to go along with such a view, dismissing it as an aspect of the 'cultural cringe'. He insists that there is, and has been, 'a distinctive Australian political thought', the result of work on 'practical problems' (p.6). (If so, there is surely nothing peculiarly Australian about this; most fruitful political thinking begins with practical problems.) Very broadly, Stokes considers that after a consensus had been reached in the Australian colonies concerning the value of political democracy, the main sources of political-theoretical problems were designing institutions and framing reform proposals for realising ideals of democracy, cooperation, social justice, and equality — motifs that underwent reinterpretation as circumstances and needs changed.

Stokes believes that in order to find Australian political thought one has to go beyond what on the face of things are the more likely sources (Hancock and fellow critics must have looked in the wrong places). 'Academic political theorists resident or born in Australia' have engaged more in debates abroad than they have in domestic debates (p.6); they have contributed to 'universalising' rather than to indigenous political thought (p.8). Their prescriptive political theorising has been specific rather than universal. Those who have systematically reflected on Australian politics have by and large been non-academic writers, public figures, and political activists. 'By developing a less restrictive . . . conception of political theory . . . it is possible to extend the range of individual people and texts considered suitable for study' (p.8). Is the game worth the candle? Stokes gives a number of 'political reasons' why distinctively 'Australian political thought' deserves study, while its past neglect is blamed for having limited 'the social and political self-awareness of Australian society and polity' (p.9). Maybe.

Australian Political Ideas is devised to broaden 'the base of scholarly study' (p.11). The topics covered are diverse, and include both historical and modern developments. No theme unifies the anthology, but what comes through is a sense that the relative neglect of the area is undeserved and that it is time to redress it. There is a discussion of 'Australian Writings on Politics to 1860' by the late Len Hume; Colin Hughes deals with the thought and effect of Edward Bellamy; and

Gregory Melleuish contributes a piece on 'Competing Images of Democracy in Australia'. M. D. Fletcher has companion pieces on Peter Carey's writing; Barbara Sullivan explores 'Contemporary Australian Feminism'; and Ian Cook's 'From Menzies to Hewson' analyses 'Two Traditions of Liberalism in the Liberal Party'.

The highlight is Hume's panoramic survey of writers and sources (books, petitions, pamphlets) from the period 1820-60, with roles and powers of governors, administration of justice, rights of free citizens, and control of revenue among the prominent issues. Arguments buttressing claims and criticisms are outlined and illustrated: British birthright, populism in working class and agrarian forms, utilitarianism, civic humanism. The essay is well versed, subtle, and clear; Len Hume was a gifted craftsman when it came to imparting intellectually satisfying shape to intricately detailed subjects.

It is no criticism of Carey's stature as a novelist to note that Fletcher's separate chapters on *Illywacker* and *Oscar and Lucinda* appear out of proportion. Why two chapters on Carey when the often explicitly political writers Miles Franklin, Christina Stead and Frank Hardy and the intellectual traditions they document go largely unrecorded? Why writers at all when one of the strongest vehicles for political comment over the last century has been the political cartoon? If distinctive contributions to our political culture are the object of the exercise, then a commentary on the incisive wit, burlesque talents and sheer inventiveness of a Bruce Petty would merit inclusion. Anthologies are necessarily very selective, but the rationale for this particular selection remains puzzling.

In the essays themselves, Fletcher refers to the manner in which Carey challenges and disrupts large statements about the nature of Australian society and politics, but in doing so makes references to the 'official reading of Australian history' and to the 'standard ("imperial") history of Australian development' (p.135). There is surely some doubt in the 1990s about what the 'official reading' of Australian history might be and it can certainly be doubted whether historians would subscribe to the threadbare conservatism that is proffered.

In both essays, we are told that Carey subscribed to Miriam Dixon's view that Australian men were more sexist than European men, a view that carried a certain polemical charge when Dixon brought it to light 20 years ago, but which now seems a touch banal, and certainly not worth two mentions. Which European men? In any case, should we read Carey in order to have our theoretical positions confirmed or denied? For all the concern about Carey's post-colonial credentials, it remains hard to accept that this theme deserves such an author-centred treatment in an anthology of this kind.

The anthology reveals the need to look beyond political studies for expressions of political thought, and it can be commended for its interesting discussion. But much work remains to be done before the investigation of distinctively Australian political thought can be judged a progressive, not just a possible, research program.

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