University of Melbourne, in the top handful of Australian institutions, offers places to around half its applicants, four times the proportion of Harvard.

Australia has benefited from less fraught race relations, and people of non-English speaking background (NESB) do not have systematically lower participation in higher education. In fact, research done a few years ago shows that they have higher participation than those with an English speaking background, though with significant variations—people from the Middle East and southern Europe are much less likely to attend university than people from Asia. Nor are NESB students confined to less prestigious institutions. Four of the Group of Eight ‘sandstone’ universities have NESB proportions above the national average, massively so in the case of UNSW and Sydney, and only the ANU is well below, reflecting the ethnic composition of Canberra.

Apart from the case of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, I am not aware of calls for affirmative action in Australia. There is no evidence that there is a significant pool of students of any background being excluded from universities, with the number of qualified applicants who miss out being quite low in recent years. The small affirmative action schemes for Indigenous people show the problems these programmes can face, with admissions being roughly equivalent to their proportion of the population, but graduation rates being much lower.

This is not to say that the ‘tyranny of the “TER”’ should be imposed to stop universities enrolling students without a strong school background. Rankings based on school performance are used not because they are the only way of assessing merit, but because they are a relatively cheap way of allocating university places. Other methods can be used to find people who are likely to be competent students.

In fact, about a quarter of commencing students each year are admitted on some basis other than the TER or previous university study. The only system-wide data, based on the 1992 commencing students, shows that non-TER students do worse than those who came in via a TER score, with about 60% of female non-TER students completing by 1997, compared to 72% of TER students. Nevertheless, the diverse admissions policy ensures that every year thousands of people who would otherwise be excluded gain a degree.

Universities also admit students who have had some disadvantage on lower TER scores than normal. Where they get appropriate support this need not be a problem. In a very successful UNSW programme, lower-TER students actually outperformed their normal entry colleagues.

Both the Right and the Left in America have become very excited by university admissions, which helps make The Big Test that rare thing, a serious scholarly book that also tells a page-turning story. In Australia, by quietly letting university admissions officers get on with their job, we seem to have arrived at a better outcome. Or maybe that is too optimistic a conclusion. Perhaps it is just that our funding system means we don’t have any universities worth fighting about.

Reviewed by Andrew Norton

National and Permanent?
The Federal Organisation of the Liberal Party of Australia 1944—1965
By Ian Hancock

Robert Menzies: A Life,
Volume 2 1944—1978
By A.W. Martin
Melbourne University Press, 1999, 596pp, $49.95, ISBN 0 52284864 8

These two new books cover what was an extraordinary period of Australian history, the seventeen years of the rule of Robert Menzies as Prime Minister, from two quite different, and yet ultimately complementary, perspectives. They provide insights and clues into what can be seen as the central problem involved in understanding the party founded by Menzies in 1944: what exactly was meant by the term liberalism after which the party was named, and how this liberalism informed its practice of government.

For Martin the focus is Menzies himself, his rocky road through the 1940s as he re-established his political reputation (as well as helping to found the Liberal Party) through to the triumph of 1949 and his many years at the helm. There is a lot about Menzies and his trips overseas (usually by boat and often extended), his interest in cricket, his family, how often he felt fatigued and his holidays. There is also politics, and how Menzies dealt with his colleagues and underlings. But the picture that tends to emerge is of a titan who inhabited the calm above the storm, and who, in his own way, embodied the
domestic ideals of the average Australian. Perhaps this emphasis reflects the sources that Martin used in writing the volume, including Menzies’ correspondence with members of his family and friends, including Lionel Lindsay.

It also indicates that for Menzies liberalism as an abstract political theory did not count for a lot. What mattered to him was the almost instinctual inheritance of Britishness as embodied in a way of life that enabled and encouraged people to pursue their particular, usually domestic, goals.

Liberalism meant an inherited way of doing things and conducting one’s life. If supporting such a way of life meant a degree of state paternalism, then so be it. The enemy was the collectivism of communism and socialism because they represented an alien and repressive way of life; and it might be necessary to curb some liberal freedoms to defeat them. Martin demonstrates that Menzies genuinely believed that the Cold War in the early 1950s was a real war and demanded an appropriate response.

Hancock’s study of the Liberal Party organisation confirms this view. Despite the unpromising title this book is both a good read and revealing of the outlook pervading Liberal circles during those years.

Again, what emerges is that the liberals of that era were not defending an abstract creed but a particular way of life in which an inherited Britishness loomed large. This is demonstrated by the overwhelming Protestant nature of the party membership, and the hostility shown by a retiring Liberal member to the young Phillip Lynch when he was initially pre-selected for Flinders in 1966. Hancock puts it nicely when he writes that at the core of the Liberals there were ‘unspoken assumptions’ and ‘treasured beliefs’ (p. 235).

This is not to be disparaging of these Liberals but merely to point out that their liberalism owed more to Burkan ‘prejudices’ than to explicit doctrinal statements, such as those favoured by an advocate of a more collectivist approach such as B.A. Santamaria. Nor did this prevent the post-war generation from being inspired by a genuine spirit of idealism. They were at one with Menzies on the need to combat the excesses of collectivism as expressed in the attempt by the Chifley government to implement a policy of bank nationalisation. It was not a reactionary backlash but a desire to create a better Australia that drove the Liberals to victory in 1949.

Of course, over the years this idealism, and the number of Liberal Party members, declined as the party organisation became essentially a device for re-electing Mr Menzies. The party organisation wanted to have some influence over policy but never succeeded, partly because in their hearts Liberals knew that party ‘democracy’ on the Labor Party model is subversive of the ideal of responsible government. Liberal Party organisers sometimes looked wistfully at what appeared to be the superior organisation of the Labor Party, but Hancock rightly points out that the Liberal Party should not be judged in terms of the Labor model. It was its own model with its peculiar strengths and weaknesses. It was sui generis.

Nevertheless he does point out how much the Labor Party loomed in the thinking of the Liberal organisers of the 1950s. Today we tend to think in terms of the invincibility of the Liberal/Country Party governments of those years, especially after the Labor split. From the inside, however, there emerges a picture that is coloured by a constant anxiety that the party will implode, just as the United Australia Party had before it. And it is worth recalling that veterans of the party expressed similar fears in 1994 as it underwent serious difficulties.

This anxiety was accompanied by a questioning about what the Liberal Party actually stood for, fuelled by the fact that even at the worst of times the Labor Party seemed to attract half of the votes of the Australian people, a figure that the Liberals could not approach. From that point of view the party was a failure; it governed because of an alliance with the Country Party...
that it resented and which it saw as largely opportunistic. In many Liberal eyes the Labor Party remained, in the 1950s, the ‘natural party of government’, and it was a party that stood for certain principles. The Liberals stood for ‘anti-Labor’ rather than anything positive; in the final analysis they existed to keep Menzies in power.

Given the ‘instinctive’ nature of their beliefs this is too hard a judgement, but it does indicate a certain hollowness at the core of the liberalism of the Liberal Party. Part of the problem was that the period of Liberal dominance in the 1950s coincided with a period when collectivist ideas were still powerful and it was generally accepted that planning and state intervention in the name of the individual were both good things. Liberals tended to believe that service to the state was the way to fulfil their true nature as individuals. It is one of the great paradoxes of Australian political history that the Liberals presided over the collectivist 1950s and that Labor was to implement many of the policies of the revived liberalism of the 1980s.

In the 1950s the Liberal Party could rely on a mixture of anti-socialism and its instinctive British heritage to create an ethos that did not require an excess of liberal philosophy. Unfortunately this left it somewhat exposed once the communist threat receded and the British liberal tradition began to erode in Australia. Once instinct had gone it was necessary to articulate a more coherent liberal philosophy that defined what the party stood for in a new age in which individualism had, almost by stealth, vanquished older collectivist ideals.

Australia has made a significant transition since the 1950s. We live in an age that is individualist rather than collectivist and, despite occasional outbreaks of nostalgia, there can be no going back to the 1940s and 1950s. That world no longer exists.

Economic liberalism has been the major attempt to articulate a coherent liberal philosophy for this new age. It has striven to fill the void left by the erosion of instinctive traditionalism. It may not be perfect, and I believe that those who criticise it for its excessive emphasis on economic efficiency have a valid point, but it is up to those who find it inadequate to come up with something better. It is simply illegitimate to wish that the good old days of a supposedly more ‘humane’ liberalism might yet return. ‘Unspoken assumptions’ are no longer good enough, partly because the transmission of Burkean ‘prejudices’ that underpinned those assumptions has effectively broken down. We live in an age of articulated political ideas that need to be spelled out explicitly. Liberalism cannot survive without intellectual substance.

It is the virtue of both these books, and they are both very good books, that they carry us back to a time when this was not the case in Australia. Discussing the 1954 Royal Tour, Martin states that many of the attitudes of the time are not fully appreciated by younger historians. This emphasises the gulf that exists between that age and our own. At the same time it also indicates that there can be no going back to the values of that time. In the new millennium there has to be articulated a version of liberalism that is more than anti-Labor, more than instinctive traditionalism and which self-consciously spells out what liberalism means today.

Reviewed by
Gregory Melluish

The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference
By Malcolm Gladwell

It takes a perceptive mind to connect a craze for Hush Puppies shoes with the dramatic decline in crime in New York City. But this is what Malcolm Gladwell has done in his book, which argues that social trends and behaviour patterns are similar to medical epidemics in one sense: they can suddenly expand or contract due to events that create what he calls a ‘tipping point’.

Based on a 1996 article in The New Yorker, Gladwell draws from a wide range of texts in history, sociology and psychology to make his case. In doing so, he has written an interesting work of sociology, which also raises questions about what sociology should set out to achieve.

Gladwell defines trends in shoes and crime alike as epidemics for three reasons. He says the fashion craze and the crime rate are both examples of contagious behaviour; in both cases, marginal changes had disproportionately large effects, and both times the changes occurred quickly.

To organise the case studies he draws from the social science literature, Gladwell talks about tipping points in terms of three rules. First, a few people drive the trend. They may be ‘social connectors’, with big social networks—though they may range in personality from one Darnell ‘Boss Man’ McGee, an inhabitant of mid-1990s East St. Louis pool halls who infected 30 women with HIV, to Paul Revere, the American revolutionary who rode at