

This is well documented by the chapter 'Recasting the Safety Net', where we can see possible parallels between efforts today to justify government intervention on social grounds and the seeds for collectivisation a century ago. Now, however, these arguments are almost exclusively used to retard the unwinding of government controls, not advance them into new areas.

Along the way the reader will come across countless invaluable and interesting facts, anecdotes and histories. Brink Lindsey's book provides a compelling account of why centralisation is in retreat, and is an important counter to the technologically-driven accounts of globalisation.

Reviewed by Christian Gillitzer

The Opportunist: John Howard and the Triumph of Reaction

Guy Rundle
Quarterly Essay, Black Inc.,
Melbourne, 2001, \$9.95
ISBN 1 86395 394 9

GUY RUNDLE's essay *The Opportunist: John Howard and the Triumph of Reaction* doesn't provide much of an understanding of John Howard. It does, however, provide a valuable insight into the values and prejudices of its author and the milieu that he inhabits, that sub-culture of what Imre Salusinszky has termed *Wetworld*, known as 'Arenaworld', which may be defined by those who read *Arena Magazine* and subscribe to its worldview.

It does not tell us much about Howard because it is not an attempt to come to terms with Howard as a human being. Rather it is an exercise in the dehumanisation and demonising of Howard as a creature who has no real ideas, no principles, or any real kind of social vision. Howard is presented as crafty, cunning piece of work who succeeds by preying on peoples' fears and anxieties. In

fact he is not even a man: but a 'short-trousered boy-man striding through a series of foreign capitals like Tintin' (p. 6). Alternately, he is the agent of the evil forces of international capital, 'first and foremost a servant of the corporate world and its aim of extending itself into every corner of contemporary life' (p. 16).

Howard appears to be behind every perfidious act that Rundle can identify the Coalition as having perpetrated, from the Patrick's waterfront affair to the anti-drugs campaign which he describes as 'a black comic allegory of John Howard's incomprehension of the contemporary world' (p. 43). Howard is the enemy of liberalism, having exploited the chimera of political correctness to prevent freedom of speech, and is not even a real conservative, just an Australian equivalent of Tricky Dicky Nixon.

Rundle sees Howard's role in the anti-drugs campaign as sinister indicating his 'desire to control how people talk to their children, to hold stubbornly to the idealised family of a bygone dispensation' (p. 43). In fact Howard can do no right. According to Rundle the 'characteristic manoeuvres of the Howard era [are] . . . an attack on the rule of law, on the separation of powers, a disdain for the judiciary, an ideological gloss on social and economic relations and, when all else fails, crude attempts at social engineering' (p. 43). Howard is not a real human being but some sort of abstract demonic force threatening all that Rundle and Arenaworld consider to be good and decent.

Some of these charges are quite serious and we should be asking, are they true? Of course the inhabitants of Arenaworld do not believe in political correctness because that is their natural mode of speech. For those of us, however, who dare to disagree with its dictates it is, I can assure you, a reality. The claims about rule of law, separation of powers and the judiciary are interesting because they indicate that Rundle doesn't really understand the Australian political system. This is not surprising as his knowledge of Australian political history is equally defective. In his account of the 1980s he has Howard's 1988 speech on Asian immigration as occurring prior to the Joh for PM campaign that took place during the 1987 election!

The fact of the matter is that under the Westminster system of responsible government there is no real separation of powers between the Executive and the Legislature as ministers sit in and are, in theory, responsible to parliament. Therefore, the claim that the executive is using the legislature as a rubber stamp does not add up to much and is no indication of something evil and sinister. It is a reality of responsible government. Howard has not been anything special in this regard. All governments attempt to do it and it is unlikely to be remedied while Australia retains responsible government. And in any case no Prime Minister can rubber stamp the Senate.

What Rundle does is to put together a disconnected set of actions and then to claim that there is an underlying pattern to them that can only be explained by reference to the evil and crafty intentions of John Howard. This desire to discover some sort of conspiratorial pattern where there is none is something that this book shares with the One Nation volume *The Truth*.

One of the primary virtues of this essay is the insight that it provides into the social and political philosophy of Arenaworld. Unfortunately, despite Peter Craven's claims for Rundle as a social theorist in the Introduction, there is not much depth to the ideas that this essay presents. Consider this statement for example:

For the liberal, societies are based on contracts; for the radical on the working out of a holistic human plan. For the conservative they arise from deep-seated forms of unity that run beneath whatever political disputes may arise (p. 26).

Surely there is more to these major political theories than this. In what sense does R u n d l e mean that contracts are the foundation of the social order for liberals? Does he mean that liberals view society as a contract



like Locke or perhaps Rundle is merely seeking to indicate, following Henry Maine, that social evolution has seen the replacement of status by contract as the basis of social interaction. Certainly one can be a liberal without believing in a social contract. Regarding his second definition, do all radicals believe in holism or just those seeking to impose a totalitarian form of radical change? But it is his discussion of conservatism that is most worrying. Rundle has read Roger Scruton and decided that Howard cannot be a conservative because he doesn't measure up to the Scruton template. Little does he know that Scruton's variety of conservatism has been described (Gordon Graham in *Politics in its Place*) as 'being closely allied to Fascism'. So at least now we know that Arenaworld doesn't think Howard is a fascist!

This really is poor stuff as it doesn't make any attempt to appreciate the diversity and richness of liberalism or conservatism or radicalism. Nor does Rundle have an inkling of the difficulty of trying to understand what conservatism, in particular, means in a 'new' society such as Australia.

What is more interesting is the implicit worldview that underpins Rundle's analysis and constitutes what might be described as Arenaworld 'commonsense'. The key ideas of this view are that the market and community stand in total opposition to each other and that the history of the past few hundred years has been the tale of the market slowly destroying the traditional institutions of community until finally, in a globalised world, we are left with a world composed of alienated individuals just waiting to be manipulated by the forces of capital.

The problem is that Rundle simply assumes this view of the world, he does not argue for it—after all, it is simply commonsense. Alas, it is nothing of the sort. It is a highly ideological view of politics, society and the coming of the modern world. It is an ideology that has its Australian roots in the peculiar history of Melbourne where it has been shared by both the Left in Arenaworld and the Right in the shape of B.A. Santamaria, John Carroll and Robert Manne.

There is no room here to make a proper critique of this ideology but it is worthwhile

making a couple of points. The first is that it can be argued that the rise of capitalism encouraged sociability and the development of social harmony by overcoming earlier forms of human interaction based on violence. Secondly Rundle argues that until a few hundred years ago everyone lived in closed societies and that voluntary associations did not emerge until the 19th century. Such associations, however, have been characteristic of European society since the Middle Ages and can be seen as crucial to the subsequent development of 'organic' European political institutions. In fact, Rundle would do himself a favour if he threw away his copy of Scruton and read some Oakshott.

This leads to the final issue: if Howard has been such a malevolent force, why has he been so successful? For Arenaworld the answer is obvious: he has won by tricks and deceit. According to Rundle, Howard is an irreparable reactionary and lost in the past with his support base being 'the older end of the social scale, to the narrowly Anglo-Celtic, to the non-urban. These are all, in terms of comparative influence, on a hiding to nothing' (p. 47). Instead, according to Rundle, Howard should have been putting together a coalition of trendies, gays, ethnics, a sort of liberal equivalent of the rainbow coalition, as these people represent the future. This strikes me as a fantasy of Arenaworld whose vision rarely extends beyond Fitzroy. Rundle also states that Howard 'is virtually at one' with the 'emotional priorities of One Nation' but that at the same time 'he is carrying a large number of the Australian people with him' (p. 53). But how can this be if only 10% of Australians ever voted for One Nation?

So, if we accept Rundle's analysis, Howard's Battlers should probably be renamed Howard's Losers. But the irony is that they still exist in sufficient numbers to have returned Howard to power with an increased majority. The problem is that Arenaworld doesn't understand the Australia that exists beyond the inner suburbs of Melbourne and it doesn't have a clue regarding Howard. Rundle's analysis of Australian politics and John Howard demonstrates this all too clearly.

Reviewed by Gregory Melleuish

Middle Class Welfare

By James Cox

Wellington, New Zealand, New Zealand Business Roundtable, 2001, NZ\$34.95
249 pp, ISBN 1 877148 72 5

Poverty and Benefit Dependency

By David Green

Wellington, New Zealand, New Zealand Business Roundtable, 2001, NZ\$34.95
107 pp, ISBN 1 877148 71 7

THE NEW Zealand Business Roundtable is to be congratulated for providing us with two stimulating, well-informed and well-written books on different aspects of New Zealand's troubled welfare state, each authored by a renowned expert in the field.

James Cox concentrates on the big-spending universal services—education, health and superannuation. David Green focuses on the various benefits and income transfers such as Sickness, Invalid and Unemployment Benefit, the Dependent Parent Benefit (DPB) and Family Support. Both authors pinpoint the financial costs and the socially deleterious effects of present and recent policies, and both outline radical alternative solutions.

As its title implies, *Middle Class Welfare* is about the millions of dollars which the government spends on services for people who could well afford to pay for these things themselves. Indeed, it turns out that, by and large, this is exactly what they are doing already! Cox shows, for example, that the top 60% of taxpayers pay 84% of all the tax collected in New Zealand, but these same people also claw back 46% of all government social expenditure. They take 71% of all the public spending on education, 55% of government health spending, 39% of income-tested benefits, and 25% of superannuation assistance. As Cox notes, 'A high proportion of welfare state services are [sic] received by households that are simultaneously paying large amounts in tax' (p.182). The middle classes are paying out with one hand and receiving the money back with the other.

Not only is this 'churning' extremely inefficient and wasteful, it also generates a