

writing style. 'His histories are full of vivid, memorable portraits of interesting human beings, both humble and great'. Blainey's 'lucid prose and deft character sketches' are also acknowledged in Bridget Griffen-Foley's empathetic piece on Blainey's corporate histories.

While critical of aspects of Blainey's work in the field, Ian Hodges piece on Blainey's war studies is a well-rounded contribution. Tom Stannage praises Blainey for always remembering to include sport in the telling of the Australian story, something which was often omitted by other historians. Stannage also provides a nice little character study of Blainey by providing two anecdotes, one of which shows Blainey's lack of pretension and the other his generosity towards those with whom he has had professional disagreements.

Clearly a book on 'The Life and Work of Geoffrey' would not have had the word 'fuss' in the title if it were not for the controversy he sparked in 1984 with his comments on Asian immigration. Morag Fraser writes an intelligent piece on Blainey's career as a controversialist.

The book is rounded off by four venerable historians all putting their perspectives into a piece which looks at the Melbourne School of History. This was not delivered at the symposium and, while it has merit, it seems slightly out of place. Perhaps if the editors had solicited one longer piece on this issue it may have gelled better.

It is a positive development that the symposium was held and that now the book published. Blainey has an important place in our intellectual life and, whether one shares his world view or not, he deserves detailed critical analysis.

However, overall this is a poorly put together and disappointing book. Even comparatively minor points like the absence of chapter numbers add to the reader's sense of frustration.

Also the book is expensive: \$39.95 for a paperback of under 200 pages of text.

The book does, at least, provide an excellent bibliography of Blainey's work. Ironically, this only serves to underline the fact that a historian as prolific and as important to Australians' understanding of their place in the world as Geoffrey Blainey deserves something more substantial than these slim pickings.

Reviewed by Richard Allsop

Common Ground: Issues That Should Bind Us and Not Divide Us
Malcolm Fraser
 Viking, Penguin Australia, Melbourne, 2002,
 266pp, \$35
 ISBN 067 004 027

Malcolm Fraser insists that, really, his views haven't changed, it is just that other people have moved around him. It is a slightly odd argument from a former politician whose post-politics writings and statements have been marked by criticism of his successors for being 'too conservative'. After all, failing to change with the times is a criticism usually directed to people for being, well, too conservative.

It is, after all, possible that the general debate has moved on as a result of learning and experience. A point made all the more striking as the virtue of such learning and experience is one of the reasons Fraser cites for *not* being conservative.

I am prepared to believe that the attitudes of the Malcolm Fraser on display in *Common Ground* are the

same as those of Malcolm Fraser PM and earlier. Which is to say, I am prepared to believe that a deep inconsistency and incoherence has continually marked Malcolm Fraser's political thinking and rhetoric.

Thus, the Malcolm Fraser of *Common Ground* is happy to talk the classical liberal talk: citing Locke et al. and making it clear he thinks, and has always thought that socialism is a completely wrongheaded approach. This is fine, until one starts looking at what he specifically complains about, what he endorses, what he fails to mention, and what he states or implies is needed.

For example, he complains about the allegedly increased power of corporations and how dangerous this is. Now, anyone who has dealt seriously with modern corporations knows that they are remarkably timid beasts, by and large. Nothing surprising in this. They are in business to make a profit. They have to get consent for their income on a weekly, daily, even hourly basis.

Moreover, in societies where corporations are thicker on the ground, people are richer and freer. Where corporations are thinner on the ground, people are poorer and more oppressed. A little more digging into the figures exposes the fact that large corporations tend to pay above average wages, and not only in developed economies. Socialist countries have and had much worse environmental records than liberal capitalist states. So, corporations are hardly plausible villains for the serious ills of the world.

Denouncing corporations is, on one level, a conservative move (since corporations are at the forefront of much of the 'creative destruction' of capitalism) and, at another, a collectivist one (since, if corporations are such a problem, clearly the state must be more active to restrain them). It is not a particularly liberal one—not in the classical liberal sense of the word.

The Malcolm Fraser of *Common Ground* is very concerned about globalisation representing not merely corporations, but markets as such running amuck. But the larger the market, the more choices open to the individual consumer, so the more empowered the consumer is. It is much easier to rip people off in a closed local market than an open global one. Again, a conservative or collectivist fear, not a classical liberal one.

Fraser seems to think it is incoherent of certain people to welcome globalisation of markets but resist globalisation of politics. On the contrary, globalisation of markets tends to increase consumer sovereignty, but globalisation of politics—what is better called *internationalisation* or even *supranationalisation*, the shifting of decision-making to international or even supranational bodies—acts to undermine political sovereignty and thus voter power. It is perfectly coherent to welcome the former and distrust the latter. It is also coherent to be suspicious of the former but celebrate the latter. It is merely not consistent with a strong belief in individual choices. It is the sort of move to be expected from someone of an authoritarian conservative outlook, or a collectivist one, but not a classical liberal one.

There is much criticism of the United States in *Common Ground*: criticism of the US of the period prior to 1941 of being too inactive in the world, of the US since 1991 of being too independently active in the world (the term of art ‘unilateralist’ is much in evidence, applying even when the US is actually being multilateral). Like so many he wants a US which uses its power but in accordance with the wishes of other players: like them he seems to not grasp that global hegemony just don’t come in this model—a US confident enough to act in the world

is a US which will not be subservient to the values of others.

Particularly not the values of a global governance agenda which is quite incompatible with the principles of the American Revolution. In *Common Ground*, Fraser does show some grasp of the accountability problems of internationalisation and supranationalisation. He just doesn’t let it bother him. I for, one, prefer a power structure which is at least accountable to someone—if only the American electorate—rather than one accountable to no-one. He outlines the sad history of United Nations’ interventions, and then blithely argues that the solution is a more powerful UN acting more often.

There are the expected condemnations of past indigenous policies, but not nearly as strong a sense about effective ways forward. There is much concern with words—apologies and reconciliation statements—but rather less with practical action. ‘Self-determination’ is only a slogan unless it is cashed out in terms of what it means on the ground, especially as many a policy failure has been perpetrated under that slogan in the last 30 years.

So much of what is in *Common Ground* is so, well, conventional. Thus, Fraser is outraged that the US should think Australia might have some defence obligations towards Taiwan. But what is the fundamental principle of Australian international security policy? That the US be prepared to expend blood and treasure in defence of a democracy of about 20 million people in a large island off the coast of Asia. Precisely how does this principle apply to us but not Taiwan? Because we must defer to the claims of a corrupt authoritarian regime whose state, the People’s Republic, has *never* ruled Taiwan?

Similarly, he takes it as read that the Israel-Palestinian dispute is the

cause of the pathological politics which breeds terrorism. But it is surely more correct that the dispute is a *product* of pathological politics. It has long been fairly clear that, barring miracles, Yassir Arafat will never sign a final peace agreement with Israel. Or that Arab regimes don’t want a ‘normalised’ Israel because then all sorts of awkward questions might be asked by their populaces—such as why Arab Israeli citizens have more rights, and more secure rights, than citizens of any Arab state, or why Israelis, with little oil, are richer than most Arabs.

As time passes, the Fraser Government looks more and more like an interregnum between excess and reform. And this effort by its Leader has little to add, being mostly a series of jeremiads by someone whose history has passed by and whose words show just how much he does not understand why.

**Reviewed by
Michael Warby**