

What's Wrong with the Liberal Party?

by Greg Barns

Melbourne University Press,
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Most news literate Australians will be familiar with Greg Barns. He enjoys enormous media exposure as a former 'Howard Government Insider' turned fierce critic whose negative views of federal government policy led to him being stripped of his endorsement as a state Liberal candidate in Tasmania. Barns starts his narrative with his experience of being disendorsed. In February 2002 the Tasmanian Liberal Party voted to take this action in response to his crime of, in his own words, speaking out 'loudly and often against the Federal Liberal Party government of John Howard for its policies and practices towards the asylum-seekers who populate our detention centres'.

That a political party should decide to disendorse one of its candidates who had spent his time attacking his own, rather than opposing, parties strikes Barns as evidence of his main argument. Barns believes the Howard-led Liberal Party has become ultra-conservative and turned its back on the 'progressive liberalism' that he champions. The party has done this for electoral advantage by securing the votes of One Nation

sympathisers and a group Barns labels the 'new-territories materialists', but which might be better known as aspirational voters or, colloquially, as battlers. These voters live in the outer suburbs of Australia's main cities, identify themselves as

working or lower middle class, and felt so alienated by the Keating Government's agenda that they switched their votes to Howard in the 1996 electoral landslide.

Barns struggles to hide his contempt for this group and the book is littered with patronising references that let you know that Barns doesn't feel their collective political views count for much. Barns believes that they are inherently racist, something he claims is ingrained in Australian culture and a factor the Howard-led Liberal Party has played on for electoral advantage. This is evidenced by the policies pursued towards illegal immigrants, the *Tampa* and 'children overboard' affairs, and a resistance to integration with Asia. Barns argues that Howard has exploited these people's fears to build a new constituency for the Liberal Party from voters who would traditionally vote Labor.

Howard is presented as a ruthless manipulator of the dark side of the Australian character, exploiting relatively simple people for his own political survival and in the process destroying diversity within the Liberal Party. Barns sees the lack of public debate over government policy from within the Parliamentary Liberal Party as evidence of Howard's domination and the decay of the collective intellectual capacity of Liberal parliamentarians and the extermination of the 'progressive' wing. He appears blind to the political consequences that would inevitably flow from a free-for-all of Coalition MPs airing their differences with the government in public. In Barns' view, it was the period between 1983 and 1993 when the party 'witnessed its most fertile intellectual debates and greatest cultural evolution'. Astonishingly, he makes no attempt to reconcile this with the five

electoral defeats suffered by the party during this time.

Barns constantly refers to the loss of intellectualism within the Liberal Party throughout his narrative. He believes the party's current ideological bent is a result of 'a lack of intellectual rigour and diversity in debate'. Those people who share Barns' views—he identifies Malcolm Fraser, Ian McPhee and Peter Baume among others—have 'fine minds'. They are 'progressive', 'compassionate', 'principled'. Those who hold a contrasting view—Tony Abbott and Nick Minchin are relentlessly singled out—are 'henchmen', 'populist', 'racist', and 'xenophobic'. Howard is chastised for not 'employing more academics in his office'. Peter Costello apparently hasn't employed anyone with a doctorate. Even think tanks like the The Centre for Independent Studies and the Institute of Public Affairs are singled out for not celebrating diversity and for sharing the Howard Government's 'intellectual siege mentality'.

At the end of this book it is hard to escape the feeling that very little has actually been said. There is little evidence supporting the unoriginal arguments Barns pursues apart from personal experience and anecdote. Chapters and facts seem to sit randomly without substantial links to the overriding thesis. For example, chapter three deals with the Liberal Party's apparent obsession with Paul Keating yet chapter four suddenly begins with the woes afflicting the National Party without any obvious links or clues as to how either of these contribute to the arguments Barns seeks to make. His use of quotes is also mystifying. Barns will often quote writings or speeches and then draw dramatic conclusions that a person less passionate about the arguments might find difficult to justify.



The views Barns holds are clear, but a journal article might have proved a sufficient vehicle in which to make them. This is what makes *What's Wrong With the Liberal Party?* such a frustrating read. Many of the questions Barns floats are timely and relevant, particularly seeking answers to the Party's current dismal showing in all States and Territories, but his treatment of them is superficial if they are addressed at all. The passion with which he holds his views is obvious, but it seems to blind him to the need to present a credible case in support of his conclusions.

Reviewed by Michael Keenan

Corrupting the Youth: A History of Philosophy in Australia

by James Franklin

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Oh! Gossip is charming! History is merely gossip . . . But scandal is gossip made tedious by morality.' So goes one of Oscar Wilde's famous aphorisms. Wilde may well have enjoyed being a member of the Sydney libertarian movement, the 'Push', had time and nature coincided.

And this book really is charming—an exceptional history, but largely a 'history' according to Wilde's definition. That is to say, it is not the book one expects to find judging by the impressive cover and size of the publication, something we all do though we say we shouldn't. What we expect is a full and technical account of Australian philosophy *per se*, the fine detail of the thought and ideas our philosophers specialised in and taught (a book that still needs to be written).

What we actually find is a comprehensive, very interesting, extremely readable, sometimes 'scandalous' history of the lives of Australia's philosophers. This is particularly disappointing as the Preface begins with such important and large questions that promise so much: 'Does life have meaning, and if so what is it? What can I be certain of, and how should I act when I am not certain? . . . Why should I do as I'm told?'. Important questions indeed. 'They are questions that may be ignored, but they don't go away.' True. Yet the book largely ignores these important philosophical questions, and I was still left with them when I finished it.

The philosophy is not entirely absent, though. It makes important cameo appearances here and there to provide some context and background, a milieu for the high drama and political excitement of Australia's 20th century intellectual lifestyles (!). And the scandal is there, too: chapters on the 'Gross Moral Turpitude' of the Orr Case, a bastard and fraud intellectual who scammed the University of Tasmania and others besides, only to end up at the High Court of Australia hopelessly challenging a verdict against him for seducing a female student (very important to the development and progress of Australian philosophy); and not to forget the suspicious 'murder' case involving CSIRO boffins, Bogle and Chandler, and two bodies by the Lane Cove River, New Year's Eve 1962. Chandler was saved from the rabble press only by the closed circle and tight lips of the 'Push'. As Wilde may have exclaimed: 'Scandal!'

Episodes like these in the book, including the rather lengthy description of John Anderson's affair with an emotionally unstable and unpromising young female philosophy student, serve to

make this book more of a gossipy personal biography of the central figures employed in philosophy in the 20th century (which no doubt helps to sell copies)—but is tedious because it is so lacking in relevance to a work of this potential, scope and importance.

The book seems not to know if it is meant to be a scandal sheet or a comprehensive study of the history of Australian philosophy. Amused by the former I kept hoping the book would turn into the latter with the passing of each chapter.

Another weakness lies in the over-use of the personal accounts of just a few well-known Australians—Donald Horne chief amongst them. The many lengthy quotes from *The Education of Young Donald* are presented as some sort of 'last word' on the mid-century experience of youth and Sydney University (despite Horne being 'no philosopher'). The fact that Donald Horne's career has been as a Sydney-centric, left-wing social commentator and national cynic does much to skew the view.

This over-reliance works by intention or otherwise to discount the mainstream, regular majority of middle-sort-of-Australia that was surviving, learning and living in other parts of the country through the upheavals of World War II, anti-Communism and the explosion that was 'The Sixties'. The few references to and quotes from more conservative (even if embryonically so) identities—like Peter Coleman, John Kerr and Garfield Barwick—make for just a few interesting counterbalances, but regrettably not enough.

In fact, one of the main letdowns of this book—yet entirely

