

political risk offers a fresh way of 'understanding and appreciating politics and public policy making.'

The result is a serious, academic book offering a literature review, a quantitative survey, and numerous case studies.

The literature review is heavy going. Althaus reports on an arid debate between political sociologists about what defines political risk. Much concern is expressed about the lack of clarity surrounding the concept. At times, the prose slips into ponderous phrases such as 'risk explains, shapes, delineates and defines society and vice-versa; and we can only understand society if we understand risk.' We are warned that 'unless politics becomes reflexive, accommodates a risk mentality and redefines itself, it will disempower itself.'

At the end, we return to the sensible conclusion that political risk is the unknown potential for political damage arising from a decision. Politicians will choose and design policies to minimise risk. But in practice how do politicians make this calculation?

The next chapter is meant to answer that question. Althaus interviewed more than 100 political players and spectators she calls 'practitioners.' Unfortunately, politicians can be elusive subjects: with nothing to gain, they usually duck participating in academic research. So sadly there are few active politicians in Althaus' sample, and almost none with experience as ministers. Political advisers are well represented. But otherwise the sample has too many bureaucrats and media commentators.

The practical wisdom of the people interviewed is, well, practical. The main finding is simply that calculating political risk is intuitive, a gut instinct honed by experience.

The final chapters of *Calculating Political Risk* are devoted to national and international case studies. As a former state public servant, Althaus chooses strategic plans from six states for analysis. The choice is odd. As Althaus herself notes, the state plans were largely marketing strategies intended to create a positive political brand for incoming premiers. The rhetoric about long-term planning rarely led to substantive policy change or shifts in funding. Most of all, the development plans did not entail any significant political risks.

There are more interesting issues that could have been tackled. Reform is typically a high risk venture in Australian politics. Some reforms—tariff reductions, the GST—have been unlikely successes; others such as industrial relations reform have failed.

But this criticism cannot be made of the two international case studies—the UK government's handling of the 'Mad Cow' crisis and US security policy after 9/11. The UK crisis is the more interesting (perhaps because it is less familiar). Althaus shows how the UK government underestimated the likely reaction of the public and media to what experts assured them was a remote risk to public health. Cabinets contemplating what Jim Hacker would call 'open government' should take note.

Althaus tackles an important subject—the intersection of policy and politics. She poses many interesting questions but, unfortunately, *Calculating Political Risk* falls short of fulfilling its promise of providing a fresh approach to understanding politics.

Reviewed by Malcolm Roberts

The Henson Case

by David Marr

Text Publishing, Melbourne, 2008

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In May 2008, the Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in the Sydney suburb of Paddington sent out invitations for an upcoming Bill Henson exhibition, featuring a nude photograph of a thirteen-year-old girl. On Thursday 22 May, a column by Miranda Devine in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and Chris Smith's afternoon talkback show on radio station 2GB sparked

public outrage. They also drew the attention of NSW police, who visited the gallery that afternoon and prompted the owners to cancel the opening scheduled for the evening. The next day, officers seized Henson photographs from the gallery.

'In a little over twenty-four hours,' David Marr writes in *The Henson Case*, 'a blast of public disapproval had seen one of the nation's leading commercial galleries closed; the Prime Minister take his place at the head of a phalanx of angry politicians (he called them 'absolutely revolting' on Channel 9's *Today* program); pictures taken into police custody; a lavish art magazine pulped; and pictures stripped from a public gallery's walls.'

Marr credits Michael Heyward of Text Publishing for thinking that 'these bizarre events deserved a short quick book,' and he delivered just that. This is an expanded journalistic account of the affair, of a length you can easily read in a few days using time snatched at the edges of a full working and domestic life. There's no padding here. Readers already aware



of what happened may still find it interesting for the thorough and detailed account of what happened to Bill Henson, his photographs and models, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, and all the people they enraged, on May 23 and 24.

The Henson Case is, nevertheless, unmistakably a single-issue book, and will hold little general interest even a few years from now. But it will remain an important part of the historical record because of Marr's access to Henson himself, and the contribution it made to flaring up the controversy anew.

Under advice, Henson declined to make any statements to the media in the immediate aftermath of the artworks' seizure, yet agreed to be interviewed for this book. So Marr was able to reveal that Henson's friends had introduced him to Sue Knight, then the principal of St Kilda Park Primary in Melbourne, who allowed him into the grounds of her school. Knight also phoned the parents of two children Henson was interested in as models, to ask if they would be interested in participating in the work. The revelation caused a storm all its own, though Victorian education department investigations into Knight's conduct cleared her of wrongdoing.

Knight's troubles—public accusations of being a child-harming monster, followed by official exoneration—parallel Henson's. The artworks police seized from Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery were eventually returned, and proposed child pornography charges never eventuated. When they were finally referred to the Classification Board, the images in question received G and PG ratings, marking them not only legal but fit for unrestricted exhibition.

The Henson Case devotes an entire chapter to the disconnect between the hysterical expressions of disgust and accusations of child pornography coming from politicians and commentators in the midst of the media frenzy, and the informed view of lawyers and classifiers that according to official standards, the images concerned were legal and inoffensive.

Readers may, with Marr, be concerned that Australian opinion and political leaders so want for a sense of proportion and due process. Or they may worry that our laws and classification schemes don't adequately reflect community standards. There appears to be a significant public appetite for commentary that suggests there are paedophiles around every corner and that artists who produce tame teenage nudes are reprehensible child pornographers.



The contemporary panic about paedophilia and child pornography, as it manifested in the Henson affair, is undoubtedly out of hand. But Marr points out that in our liberal society, we are bound to tolerate some things. Legally, Henson's photographs are 'allowed, not endorsed,' and their appearance sends a message 'that our kind of country permits publication of material many find distasteful.' In a similar vein, Cate Blanchett says that in defending Henson, 'it was very important to me that it was clear we were not saying it was reprehensible for people to have their own opinions.' There is supposed to be a distance between behaviour and expression that you merely do not like, and that which is so seriously dangerous or harmful that it must be legally prohibited, backed with threats of severe punishment. Unfortunately, as Marr writes,

'When we disapprove of something we want governments to leap into action.'

As a policy outcome of the Henson affair, in December 2008 the Australia Council released a protocol for artists working with children. Before commencing a project involving children under fifteen, artists receiving federal funding through the council must now supply written confirmation that child's parent or guardian 'that the artist has explained the context for the work to the parent(s) or guardian(s) and to the child, and a) they understand the nature and intended outcome of the work; b) they commit to direct supervision of the child while the child is naked; and c) they agree it is not a "sexual, exploitative or abusive context".'

Given the degree of outrage voiced by NSW and federal political leaders, it is surprising that the code does not prohibit projects involving depiction of naked or semi-naked minors entirely. Instead, it will just have a chilling effect on artistic expression, so that many artists receiving funding may prefer not to work with or feature children at all, even fully clothed. That a mere chilling effect is worth celebrating tells you something about where we've come to. These are dark times for art, freedom, and common sense. The creative process should not begin with thinking of how you're going to satisfy a government agency—but then, maybe it shouldn't start with asking for a handout, either.

Reviewed by Benjamin Hourigan