THE IDEAS OF POLITICIANS

A book on the politics of ideas in Australia focuses too narrowly on political elites, writes **Greg Melleuish**

What Were They Thinking?
The Politics of Ideas in Australia

By James Walter with Tod Moore
UNSW Press,
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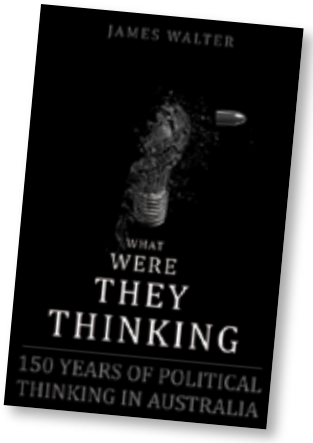

What Were They Thinking? seems to be an odd book as it's unclear what James Walter is trying to do. The book is not a history of political ideas in Australia. Walter seems more narrowly interested in the ideas that have influenced the way the country is run. He believes that ideas are important and that they shape the way political actors behave, which explains his emphasis on political elites and the ideas that have inspired them.

Ideas and events

This focus on political actors raises something of a problem. Ideas are often generated by a response to events and circumstances. They tend to be created by people who are one step removed from the political process. They can be politicians temporarily relieved of the burden of office, or they can be writers seeking to deal with problems they have identified and wish to remedy. When individuals have to engage in the art of governing, there is a great tendency for political realities to wear down and modify their ideas. Hence Bruce Smith, who only held office once in his political career, is a far better guide to liberalism as a set of ideas than George Reid, who had to constantly bob and weave in the quest for high political office.

The ideas of those in political power are generally less interesting than those who are concerned with developing critiques of those in power. The ideas of politicians, once they have attained office, often move towards the commonplace and what might be termed political *topoi*, that is, the role of ideas for those in power is often rhetorical, designed to appeal to prejudice and unacknowledged suppositions. Running a country is a practical matter, and ideas have to be adjusted to meet those practicalities. In nineteenth century NSW, Henry Parkes would appeal to a set of ideas

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about how those in power were corrupt and betraying the ideals of liberalism when he was out of office. When he was in office, his opponents would use the same set of ideas to criticise his actions!

Walter's book devotes an inordinate amount of space to John Howard, and to a lesser extent Kevin Rudd. While Howard was a major political actor who had a considerable impact on Australia, he was hardly an innovative, or particularly interesting, thinker. The attention devoted to him in this book perhaps reflects a residual Howard hating tendency that persists amongst the Left intelligentsia, and a wish to blame him for the relative lack of success that their ideas have had in recent times.

Political ideas outside parliament

Walter gives some attention to 'social movements,' especially those that arose in the second half of the twentieth century. However, he completely ignores religion and the churches. This is strange given the role that clerics have played in the intellectual life of Australia, especially in the nineteenth century. From John West to George Pell, they have contributed to the political life of Australia. John Dunmore Lang, a Presbyterian clergymen and indefatigable political polemicist of the mid-nineteenth century and an important political thinker, gets barely a mention, while figures such as Thomas Roseby, a Congregationalist minister and radical social activist of the late nineteenth century, are passed over in silence. There is no mention of the Papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, despite its influence on the idea of the basic wage, surely one of the most significant ideas thrown up by Australian politics. B.A. Santamaria receives only cursory attention even though his ideas have influenced many significant political players in this country.

Oddly, Walter does not say much about David Syme, perhaps the most influential political propagandist of the nineteenth century, who made and broke Victorian governments. Without Syme's tireless efforts, Protection might never have gained the dominant role it did in Australia. If anyone has had a massive influence on the shape of Australian politics, it was surely Syme. Equally, he ignores William Hearn, who wrote some very interesting work, both on constitutional law and economics.

Labels without detail

The ideas of the figures who *are* mentioned in the book get very little discussion. Instead, there are lists of names with labels attached. Hence, we are told about 'social liberalism' but given little indication of what it actually meant in the Australian context. There is no attempt to discuss the ideas of Frederic Eggleston, let alone W.K. Hancock. Part of the problem may be that Walter has not read a lot of the primary material (many of the footnotes refer to quotes in secondary sources). One does not get the sense that this is an author who really feels at home in the material that he is discussing.

For example, it would have been helpful to know what particular shape the Australian variety of liberalism or conservatism or socialism took or an interpretation of those ideas.

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Consider the case of George Reid. Despite his reputation as a populist, Reid was not intellectually incompetent, and had a quite interesting intellectual pedigree. His father was a Presbyterian minister brought to Australia by J.D. Lang. Reid was tutored by Barzillai Quaife, who wrote the first work of philosophy published in Australia. In the 1870s, Reid wrote two books that indicate that he had been influenced by Lang's view of history. Walter clearly has not read Reid's writings of the 1870s (one of which he wrongly ascribes to Henry Parkes).

This lack of understanding of the shape that political ideas took in the hands of particular individuals means that we cannot have a lot of confidence in Walter's overall interpretation of the development of political ideas in Australia. He describes Bruce Smith as a NSW free-trade

thinker, apparently unaware that *Liberty and Liberalism* was based on Smith's experiences in Victoria where he had grown up. Victorian free-traders were quite distinct from those in NSW, largely because they did not hold office and hence were freer to develop their ideas. The point is that ideas are more than just things to which one attaches a label. They vary according to time, place and the individual who develops them.

Walter does not really engage with the secondary material on Australian political thought that is outside his ideological universe. At one stage, he proudly announces how all the best work on Australian liberalism is by those who once called themselves socialists, such as Stuart Macintyre, Judith Brett, and Tim Rowse. However, he does not seem much interested in work done outside this group. From the footnotes, there is no indication that Walter has read the important works of Michael Roe, either on the mid-nineteenth or early twentieth century Australia. Equally, he ignores William Coleman's book on Australian economists of the 1920s and 1930s, Jim Franklin's book on Australian philosophy, and Len Hume's work on political ideas before 1860.

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Paradigm shifts

Walter has a model of the development of political ideas in Australia that appears to be based on the idea that paradigm shifts occur every so often. As new generations come along, they bring with them new sets of ideas that become, for a time, the dominant, need I say hegemonic, set of ideas. Political ideas have certainly changed over time, but it is difficult to understand the mechanics of how they change. For example, there was a short period in the late 1920s when, after the dominance of statist ideas, more classically liberal ideas appeared in the work of Edward Shann and W.K. Hancock, and even Frederic Eggleston. But for some reason, this was a mere efflorescence that did not lead anywhere in the short term. Was this because there was a new 'paradigm' but the time for its flourishing was premature? Or was this a last flowering of the paradigm of nineteenth century liberalism? Or was it something entirely different?

I wonder whether the development of ideas is as mechanical as Walter suggests, and whether there is a much messier and complex process going on. Old ideas sometimes do not die as readily as we imagine; they change, mutate and re-emerge in a new form. Walter does indeed recognise the 'new wine in old bottles' syndrome in his discussion of the ideas of Kevin Rudd and John Howard. Rather than a succession of paradigms, perhaps what we see is a constant re-working of some basic themes that change as circumstances, and the particular concerns of those developing the ideas, change. As both J.S. Mill and T.B. Macaulay recognised, politics, especially in countries with British political traditions, revolves around the twin themes of implementing progressive change and maintaining stability and order. Therefore, there will always be those seeking to change and reform institutions and ways of doing things just as there will be those who plead the case for venerable traditions. What people want to change or to defend will itself change according to circumstance.

Australian progressivism

Walter neglects Roe's important thesis regarding 'progressivism.' Roe argued that the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw an Australian equivalent of American progressivism—that human beings could be improved through the application of science by the state. Universities were seen as the laboratories where both physical and social sciences would be developed. Politicians and public servants could use these ideas to create a better people and a better society.

The key was applied science, and the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR),

which was founded after World War I, was intended as a body devoted to the application of science in the Australian context. This reform agenda had strong links to the Protestant reformers of the 1890s, discussed by J.D. Bollen, who linked social reform and temperance with eugenics. This was the so-called 'Social Laboratory' that marked Australia as a leading progressive democracy in the early years of the twentieth century. Its characteristic feature was Industrial Arbitration, Justice Higgins's 'new province for law and order,' which was supposed to simultaneously reduce industrial conflict, raise living standards, and enhance the productive capacity of the country.

If the Australian (or Deakinite) Settlement was the key event of twentieth century Australian political history, then it cannot be understood without an appreciation of the wider intellectual background such as that described by Roe. It does not make much sense if explained in narrow political terms. The wider background was a faith in the capacity of science to remake the world. Bruce Smith believed that liberalism equalled political science, and this meant as little state intervention as possible. The more popular view, the hegemonic ideology of the 'social laboratory,' was that the state should exert control and use science in order to build up the Australian community. This meant a homogenous population, protection of local industry, and state intervention in a whole range of areas. It was an extended program of social engineering.

Hence, the White Australia policy, which Smith opposed, was not just about keeping out people from a different racial background. It also was about 'improving' the existing Australian population through a variety of means—from health centres for babies to lots of physical exercise to free milk in schools. If the radical reformers had had their way, it would also have meant sterilisation of the 'unfit.' But this is where the Australian story becomes interesting. Just as the basic wage owed something to *Rerum Novarum*, so it can be argued that the large Catholic presence in Australia helped prevent it from going down the route adopted by North America and Northern Europe in the name of eugenics.

In other words, the Australian Settlement only makes sense when viewed as part of a wider program of social engineering undertaken by both the Commonwealth and state governments during the early part of the twentieth century. To understand it, one needs to have an appreciation of not only the varying forms of liberalism of late nineteenth century Australia but also Catholic social thought, Protestant conceptions of social reform, and the faith in science that developed amongst certain intellectuals during those years.

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In a way, Manning Clark was not wrong when he described the history of Australia in terms of the interaction between the Enlightenment, Catholicism and Protestantism. One can see those forces shaping Australian politics and political culture during the course of the twentieth century.

There is a richness and complexity to the study of political ideas in Australia that goes way beyond the ideas of the major political parties and politicians. Australia has a unique political history and to understand it, one also needs to appreciate the sorts of ideas that Australians themselves have developed to understand the nature of the nation's politics. This means understanding the range and variety of those ideas. In focusing on politicians and politics in a rather narrow fashion, Walter provides a partial story of the importance of ideas in Australian political history. There is, however, a much richer and more interesting story waiting to be told.