

Although Keating believed that the government's best years were likely behind it, he renewed the Labor Party and the government after he was elevated.

While Hawke's federalism reforms were largely shelved by Keating, national competition policy aside, the 1993 election was a vindication of the Keating challenge. d'Alpuget claims Hawke would certainly have beaten Fightback! but this is less than clear. Despite Hawke deserving the lion's share of credit for the 1987 and 1990 victories, Hawke's loss of public and party confidence in 1991 was pronounced. By the end of 1991, it was not clear whether this decline was terminal or whether he could have recovered to win against Hewson.

In addition, Keating finished the tariff reform process, brought in enterprise bargaining, launched a republican process, the superannuation we know today, and responded to Mabo. Hawke may have done some of these things, had he won in 1993, but Keating did them his way.

For many, Hawke is the best Prime Minister in Australian history, and he should let historians decide his fate. Keating has indicated he may write a retaliatory response, but sometimes it is better to rise above the fray. Keating may write a better book, but these protagonist led books are not often reliable accounts of the governments they led or served.

Both were great men but in different ways. Their partnership, complemented by a talented ministry, rescued Australia from a deep economic malaise and helped turn the country towards its Asia-Pacific future. This is the abiding

legacy of the Hawke-Keating era and will always bind them together in a shared project.

**Reviewed by Corin McCarthy**

*The Last Intellectuals: Essays on Writers and Politics*

**By Peter Coleman**

Quadrant Books, Sydney, 2010  
\$44.95, 324 pages  
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Peter Coleman wrote the essays in this book over the last 10 years, rediscovering his own voice after many years in politics when his mind was his own but his public voice was not. The result is a collection of essays for connoisseurs: fine writing, simple and direct in style, with no fancy pretensions but often a hint of direct, astringent wit instead.

Coleman has been such a quiet achiever in his lifetime that the result is enlightening—in the volume of work, the range, the depth, and in the persona that emerged when this slow learner (the title of his 1994 memoir) eventually grew up and 'struck a length,' as spin bowlers say.

He has written nine books of his own, was a co-author of two others, and has edited five more, including three important collections of papers. Of course, the bulk is not hard to explain because anyone who spends most of 50 years writing will produce a lot of words. The point is to have something to say. Coleman

has made telling contributions in several fields, including social commentary, memoirs, biography, reflections on writers and writing, and inside views of politics ranging from the international campaign of the Congress for Cultural Freedom to the brawl between the trendies and the uglies in the NSW division of the Australian Liberal Party.

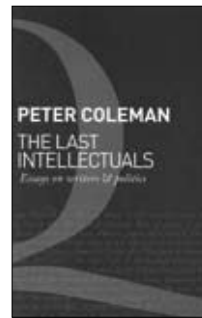
The first thing that many people want to know about a writer is where they are 'coming from.' Coleman's first book in 1974 was a scathing critique of Australian censorship, *Obscenity, Blasphemy, Sedition: Censorship in Australia*. This suggests that he is not a rigid conservative of the kind

that Hayek criticised but inclined towards classical liberalism. This may not be immediately apparent because Coleman has kept out of economic debates, sensibly exploiting his comparative advantage in other areas. However, I am advised of a 'dry'

economist's comment that the treatment of economic issues in *Quadrant* was never better than the period when Coleman was the editor.

The essays fall into four parts (1) Cultural Freedom and the Cold War, (2) Poets and Journalists, (3) Party Games, and (4) What Shall We Do With Our Lives?

Each section has its own special interest and reveals various facets of his knowledge and experience. Some readers may be most interested in the 12 essays in the first part of the book, on the fight-back by the Congress for Cultural Freedom against communist propaganda in intellectual and cultural life.



There is a 'fly on the wall' account of a crucial meeting of the local chapter of the movement in 1961, a sombre record of the collapse of the parent body (Paris, 1970), and the story of his research for *The Liberal Conspiracy*, carried out in the 1980s among the surviving organisers of the resistance.

The memory of that resistance needs to be kept alive. Reactions to the Russian Revolution and its aftermath were the defining twentieth century issues for judging the integrity and credibility of journalists, commentators and intellectuals. The overwhelming majority of 'progressives' on the left failed the test and, moreover, continue to fail it by refusing to salute the honourable men and women who made the correct call in the Cold War. Coleman (and Robert Manne), among others, did not fail. They were prepared to make hard yards when it was very unfashionable in intellectual and academic circles to tell the truth about communism.

There is an essay on intellectuals that brings to mind my own favourite piece on the topic, written by Vincent Buckley in the collection *Australian Civilisation*, edited with an Introduction by Coleman. Buckley suggested that intellectuals might be identified by the contents of their briefcases, containing perhaps a volume of poetry or a serious biography, a theatre program, the draft of a contribution to a little magazine, along with the daily paper and a cut lunch. The collection has an all-star cast including A.G.L. Shaw, Manning Clark, Robin Boyd, Vincent Buckley, Robert Hughes, Sol Encel, and James Wolfensohn.

Many local readers will be entranced by the essays on (mostly) Australian writers in the second part. Again, Coleman is perpetuating the memory of significant figures (not all world figures but important in the local context) who may easily be forgotten: David Scott Mitchell of the Mitchell Library, James McAuley, Xavier Herbert (a larger than life character), Amy Witting (aptly described as a wildflower), Bazza McKenzie (possibly well forgotten), Bruce Beresford (pioneering film-maker), John Passmore (a world class scholar), Pierre Ryckmans (also world class), and Paddy McGuinness, 'a difficult case.'

The 'Party Games' essays mostly treat Australian politics from several angles, including the stages of frustration that Coleman experienced from the time he contracted the political virus to the time he escaped. 'Leaves from the Diary of a Madman' contains some treasures, including the reason why I found myself contributing to the first Corporate Plan of the Health Commission of NSW. The project was driven by Coleman in his capacity as Parliamentary Secretary to Premier Tom Lewis. The essay 'Backbench Blues' begins with 'Chances are your local member of parliament is a weirdo (I should know, I used to be one).' 'John Gorton: My Part in his Downfall' is a reminder of the frustration with the Menzies years that made 'Jolly John' Gorton, 'this mixture of Snake Gully and Oxford,' such an attractive alternative to other Liberal leaders, and later swept Gough Whitlam into power. It is a nice corrective to the popular memory to recall that Gorton

sought to liberalise attitudes to abortion, homosexuality and censorship, and expanded the Commonwealth role in arts and policy, especially to restore the film industry.

Part Four includes Coleman's address on the occasion of receiving a well-earned Doctorate of Letters from his alma mater, recalling the morning 62 years before when he arrived as an ignorant and spotty boy. There is a defence of poetry with reference to John Stuart Mill's depression caused by the over-intellectualised regime of reading imposed by his father. And a meditation on Matthew Arnold's hopes for the triumph of sweetness and light, even though he was ambivalent about the trends of his times, including the role of free markets in destroying old crafts.

There is something for everyone in this rich and varied body of work, and everyone will find something that makes them stop and rethink some settled opinions, especially the opinion that Coleman was a political hack or a mindless Cold Warrior. Some will be most impressed with the global picture that he painted in *The Liberal Conspiracy*, others will be equally impressed with works on smaller canvases, like the charming miniature of *Memoirs of a Slow Learner*. Most will return time and again to re-read their favourite pieces.

**Reviewed by Rafe Champion**

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