

THE IMPORTANCE OF IDEOLOGY IN AUSTRALIAN POLITICAL HISTORY

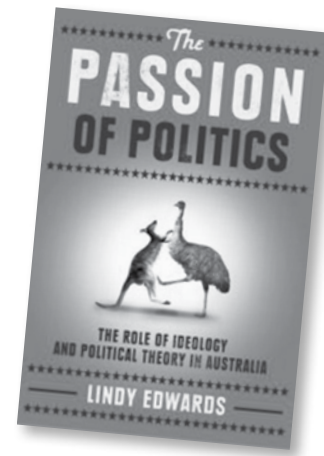
**The Passion of Politics:
The Role of Ideology and Political Theory in Australia**

By Lindy Edwards

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It used to be a commonplace observation that political ideas and theories have left only a faint imprint on Australian political history. About a century ago, foreign visitors such as Albert Metin and James Bryce commented on the deep pragmatism of Australian politics. This judgment was reinforced by local observers, foremost among them the great historian Keith Hancock who noted the derivative character of Australian political ideas and the Australian tendency to take up fading intellectual fashions: ‘Her habit is to adopt the *ism* which in the country of its origin is already a *wasm*.’ Even Australia’s reputation as a pioneer in social experimentation, Hancock observed, stemmed from ‘a philosophy made in England.’

In recent decades these assumptions have been questioned in numerous books and scholarly articles, and the phrase ‘Australian political thought’ is no longer oxymoronic, but has come to refer to a respectable subject of intellectual inquiry. Lindy Edwards’ *The Passion of Politics: The Role of Ideology and Political Theory in Australia* is a further contribution to this literature that takes seriously the role of ideas in shaping Australian political developments past and present.

The Passion of Politics aims to provide a broad framework of ideas for understanding some of the key moments in post-federation Australian politics. As an introductory work, the book

serves its purpose and will be of interest to anyone looking for a short, general survey of Australian political history. Beyond this, the book aims to make some connections between Australian political ideas and arguments and current academic debates about the nature of ideology—‘a scoping study for a new approach to ideology and political theory’ (p. 1), which aims ‘to give new scholars in the field a way of orienting themselves in the discipline’ (p. 13).

Unlike the bulk of the work, the preface is addressed to scholars rather than the general reader, and it is here that Edwards provides a broad ‘integrated framework’ for analysing competing ideologies. Edwards wants to overcome the pejorative connotations that ideology has carried within political studies, to understand ideologies as forms of both explanation and advocacy, and to break down the distinction between ideology and political theory as well



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as between political theory and political practice. All ideologies, Edwards contends, contain certain guiding assumptions about human nature how social order is attained; and the values and ideals in the 'good life' (p. 5). To unpack the way individual ideologies function, Edwards focuses particularly on the second, on what is termed their 'logics of order.' How do ideologies understand the sources of social cooperation? Over time, three basic responses have been given: (1) the individualist response where social order is generated spontaneously through the voluntary transactions of individuals pursuing their interests; (2) the cooperative compact where people collectively deliberate on the terms of a just and equitable social order; and (3) identity norms where authority and social function are allocated according to prescribed social roles or identities. Roughly speaking, these 'logics of order' map onto the modern ideologies of liberalism, socialism/social democracy, and conservatism respectively. Edwards then uses these to discuss key moments in Australian politics.

A further point discussed in the preface concerns the relationship between ideology and political theory. Edwards wants to place ideology at the heart of the study of political thought rather than seeing it as its 'poor cousin' (p. 10). She thinks the arguments used to distinguish political theory or philosophy from ideology are not valid since both seek to have a practical effect. What she seems to suggest here is that we need to get beyond the 'great books' approach to the study of political theory since 'The great political theorists of history were *for the most part* ideologists seeking to influence the politics of their day' (p. 11) (emphasis added).

It is one thing to claim all political philosophy is oriented towards the practical world, or even that philosophers' ideas are invariably shaped by, as well as shape, their 'ideological' context, but it doesn't automatically follow that all political philosophers are therefore essentially ideologists. If this is the case, it is difficult to know how to distinguish the kind of thinking involved in the creation of works such as Plato's *Republic* or Hobbes's *Leviathan* as opposed to Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* or Lenin's *What is to be Done?* All these works sought to effect political

change, but to describe the first two as 'for the most part' works of ideology is surely to present a skewed reading. To insist on a distinction between philosophy and ideology does not, it seems to me, imply the 'depoliticisation' of the discipline of political theory, as Edwards suggests. The point is to recognise that political thought operates at different levels of analysis, and philosophy aims to transcend the kind of thinking contained in the merely strategic or the doctrinal.

If the reader has the expectation from the preface that *The Passion of Politics* will go on to discuss some of the important works of Australian political theory, and perhaps how such works have been used in political debates, then he or she will be disappointed. There is no discussion of works such as Bruce Smith's *Liberty and Liberalism* (1887), William Jethro Brown's *Underlying Principles of Modern Legislation* (1912), or Elton Mayo's *Democracy and Freedom* (1919). Nor is there any discussion of theoretical works written by politicians such as H.V. Evatt's early work *Liberalism in Australia* (1918), H.B. Higgins, *New Province for Law and Order* (1922), or Frederick Eggleston's *State Socialism in Victoria* (1932). Edwards is concerned with some of the key political actors, including Deakin, Reid, Hughes, Evatt and Menzies, and the important political debates and initiatives they were engaged in—white Australia; social reforms, including industrial arbitration; fusion; and the splits within the Australian Labor Party (ALP). Each of these players and moments are interpreted through the lens of the three-way ideological schema, which undoubtedly has some explanatory value. However, what is said about each of these subjects is so brief that much of the nuance is missed. For instance, Edwards discusses the shift within liberalism from 'classical' to 'new' or, what she terms 'modern,' liberalism that took place in the latter part of the nineteenth century, associated with the philosopher T.H. Green and his reforming disciples. The influence of this school of thought in Australian political thought and practice in the early twentieth century is well documented, and Edwards rightly discusses figures such as Deakin and Higgins in this context. But this influence is also very

strong in Evatt's *Liberalism in Australia*, which points to the new/modern liberal stream within the Labor Party. It could be argued that this influence extends to Whitlam and beyond, yet it receives no attention.

Moreover, in the early twentieth century, the ideological vocabulary was more elastic than it would become in subsequent decades. Terms such as new liberalism, liberal socialism, state socialism, and ethical socialism were common, and while each contained nuances of meaning they also shared much common ground. Many new liberals (going back to J.S. Mill) welcomed certain forms of 'socialism'; while liberal politicians such as Deakin and Eggleston could warn of the dangers of socialism, they were also prepared to accept the necessity and desirability of forms of 'socialistic' legislation. Moreover, it is also at this time that 'conservatism' is increasingly interpreted as a commitment to free markets (i.e. classical liberalism). Unfortunately, Edwards doesn't really capture the subtlety of these debates that mostly took place in the overlapping regions of her ideological framework.

When we get to the 1970s there is an abrupt change of direction. Here Edwards deals with the new social or liberation movements including feminism, gay rights, Aboriginal rights, and multiculturalism. But rather than interpreting them through the ideological prism, they are seen as the outworking of a broad range of intellectual trends—post-structuralism, post-modernism, the cultural turn, and discourse analysis under the umbrella label 'constructivism.' Whereas the earlier ideologies focused primarily on economic concerns, the liberation movements 'were about exposing cultural forms of power' (p. 96). While there is much to be said for seeing these movements in such terms, it is not clear whether the schools of thought that gave rise to these social movements are to be considered ideologies. Edwards provides very little discussion of the matter. In the penultimate chapter, where she returns to the original ideologies (liberalism, socialism, conservatism) indicating their various strengths and weaknesses, she ignores constructivism, indicating that she does not in fact consider it an ideology. Perhaps there

is a subconscious Marxist view here that links ideology exclusively to economic arrangements. Moreover, while the liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s were undoubtedly influenced by 'constructivism,' an enormous amount of contemporary liberal political theory is devoted to issues such as feminism, gay rights, Aboriginal rights, and multiculturalism. Unfortunately, since none of this literature is dealt with, Edwards misses an opportunity to discuss liberalism as something other than an economic doctrine.

Liberal ideology does make a comeback, however, in the 1970s and 1980s in the form of neo-liberalism, an economic theory that built on classical liberalism but whose target was the welfare state rather than aristocratic power. Here Edwards is on familiar ground to her earlier work *How to Argue with an Economist*. But in *The Passion of Politics*, she is not concerned with rebutting neo-liberalism or its public policy spin-off known as public choice theory, but simply outlining its basic assumptions and accounting for its widespread implementation in the last three decades of the twentieth century. Most of the familiar economic arguments on the need for liberal reforms are rehearsed, and given that Edwards doesn't offer any countervailing arguments, one is left with the impression that she finds compelling the 'neo-liberal' analysis of the economic choices facing policymakers in the 1980s.

Another manifestation of the 'turn to the right' in recent years is the development of 'neo-conservatism.' Where neo-liberalism, with its use of mathematical modelling and narrow understanding of rational action, largely ignored the claims of constructivist social theory, neo-conservatism launched a direct assault. Operating principally at the cultural level, neo-conservatism challenged the cultural and moral relativism perceived to be at the heart of the intellectual movements that drove multiculturalism, gay liberation, Aboriginal rights, and feminism. Again Edwards reiterates familiar arguments, this time around the Australian values debates, the history wars, and the assertion of traditional views on marriage. This section is very brief and not altogether satisfactory. The American roots of neo-conservatism are skimmed over briskly.

Francis Fukuyama and Irving Kristol get passing mentions and Leo Strauss is dealt with in two paragraphs. The difference between traditional conservatives and neo-conservatives seems to boil down to the fact that the former believed cultural systems are the product of social evolution and the accumulation of experience, whereas neo-conservatives (such as Strauss) stress the role of strong leadership in creating belief systems that are presented as absolutely true. While this is true as far as it goes, much more needs to be said about the rise of neo-conservatism as a consequence of what John Gray has called the 'undoing' of traditional conservatism through the widespread implementation of free-market reforms.

Moreover, the connections between American neo-conservatism and contemporary Australian conservatism are assumed rather than argued for. This means the book fails to capture much of the texture of recent Australian political and cultural history. Edwards suggests that Howard's embrace of a 'new nationalism' was a response to Keating's multiculturalist agenda, but she says very little about the deeper sources connected with the decline of Australia's British identity. This has been well documented by James Curran and Stuart Ward (*The Unknown Nation: Australia after Empire*, 2010), and Greg Melleuish recently made the convincing case that a dominant liberal-conservative tradition in Australia was closely linked to a conception of Britishness. With the demise of Britishness, Australia's liberal-conservative inheritance is increasingly fragile. This dynamic is arguably more important for understanding the 'new nationalism' than anything coming from America. It also makes problematic the very label 'neo-conservative.'

The Howard government is presented principally as neo-conservative rather than neo-liberal, given that most of the liberal economic reforms had been implemented by the time it took office in 1996. Curiously, even the *Work Choices* legislation is depicted as neo-conservative because it enshrined the hierarchical view that bosses had legitimate authority to determine workers' wages and conditions. Edwards sees Tony Abbott as the chief source of this view, yet she fails to mention that Abbott was (and remains) one of the least

enthusiastic defenders of this policy. Again the tensions within modern conservatism aren't fully canvassed.

This reading of Abbott points to another limitation of Edwards' account, namely the role of religion in shaping social policy. There is no discussion of the Democratic Labor Party (DLP) or Santamaria on Abbott's political development. Likewise, Kevin Rudd's 'Howard's Brutopia' essay in *The Monthly* gets a mention, but not his 'Faith in Politics.' The few passing references to religion indicate that for Edwards, religion belongs to world of cultural meanings that is central to the conservative mind. Yet as Geoffrey Blainey has recently written, Christianity has from the beginning been driven by social concerns and the desire to create a more just world. This Christian motivation is central to T.H. Green, and to many in Australia influenced by the new liberal tradition, including many of the WEA (Workers' Educational Association) intellectuals such as G.V. Portus and E.H. Burgmann of the early twentieth century. Likewise the early feminist movement was deeply shaped by religious influences. The split in the ALP in the 1950s cannot be fully appreciated without acknowledging the religious teachings of the DLP. Even Rudd's invocation of Christian socialism points to an important but often overlooked strand of thinking in Australian politics. Though it is standard practice in much contemporary Australian political science and history to ignore the religious dimension, this neglect invariably leads to a misreading of the past in that it reflects contemporary sensibilities. Edwards follows this practice and there seems no room for religion as a source of political 'passion.'

Though *The Passion of Politics* contains some serious limitations, Edwards' approach is nevertheless original and could potentially yield important insights on Australian politics. It is not a partisan book, but seeks to give a fair hearing to all the ideologies considered, indicating how each responds to basic human motivations. As it stands, *The Passion of Politics* obscures important aspects of Australian political ideas and political history even while it illuminates others.