

Commentators in this section, while applauding the progress made, have further suggestions for improvement. Ed Shann makes the point that 'even a Rolls Royce can be improved' (p.128) and calls for greater transparency in the budget process, as does Ian Marsh. Taking Alan Henderson's paper on 'The Commonwealth-State Dimension' as his starting point, Cliff Walsh argues that while the reforms have benefited the Commonwealth's major portfolios, providing greater predictability for future planning to both agencies and their clients, this benefit should — and could — be extended to the States through renegotiation and reform of federal fiscal arrangements.

This book should be an eye-opener for anyone unfamiliar with Australian public-sector management, 1990s style. For those who have followed the progress of management reform at the Commonwealth level in recent years, there is not a great deal here that is new, thanks in great part to the increased openness of government through the publication of more informative annual reports, budget papers and documents like the Cabinet Handbook, and the willingness of public servants like Dr Keating to contribute to public seminars, books and journals. For them, the value of the book would lie in its provision in one place of an up-to-date, detailed account of cabinet and budget processes in the Australian government.

Not nearly as much is available about current decision making at State and Territory levels, even for those prepared to search around for it. The promise in the Preface of future publications focusing on the States and Territories (with, one hopes, a similar amalgam of practitioner and informed observer contributions) is, therefore, very welcome.

Defining the Underclass

David Pollard, formerly Senior Assistant Secretary with the NSW Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs, reviews The Emerging British Underclass by Charles Murray, with commentaries by Frank Field, Joan Brown, Alan Walker and Nicholas Deakin (Institute of Economic Affairs, London, 1990).

It is usually difficult to read collections of forum papers where a prominent thinker puts forward a thesis to be torn apart by pre-selected respondents with barrows of their own to push. The frequent result of such exercises is that the two groups talk past each other. The papers in this collection are nonetheless punchy and arresting, and do a lot to advance the notion of an underclass in social-policy research.

Charles Murray uses the term 'underclass' to denote those sections of the poor who are permanently unemployed and welfare dependent. Most petty crime and drug trafficking are attributable to this group. Proxy measurements of the underclass include indicators on crime, truancy, unemployment and illegitimacy. Murray's thesis is that this group exhibits behaviour that alienates them deeply and perhaps permanently from mainstream values such as work, the family and compliance with the law. Murray employed the concept of the underclass with enormous skill in *Losing Ground: American Social Policy 1950-1980* (1984), where he attempted to show why American blacks were disproportionately represented among the unemployed, the welfare dependent, and criminals. In *The Emerging British Underclass* he applies the same methodology to the UK; he argues that an underclass exists in the UK and that the concept is useful for discussing the causes and solutions to long-term poverty, unemploy-

ment and welfare dependency.

The responses of the other speakers in the forum are robust, to say the least. Frank Field thinks the idea of an underclass is impractical; local communities do not exercise much practical control over their own affairs in a market economy; and cuts in health and welfare expenditures (implicit in Murray's critique) would achieve nothing. Field agrees that identifiable groups can be labelled an 'underclass', but stresses solutions that reduce inequalities of wealth and income.

Joan Brown challenges Murray's claim that single unmarried mothers are a particularly striking manifestation of the urban underclass. She concedes that efforts should be made to strengthen two-parent family life, but does not explain precisely how this can be done. Alan Walker rejects Murray's thesis as no more than a rerun of the old distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor, and argues that pauperisation and social segregation are conscious acts of government policy. Nicholas Deakin questions Murray's figures on crime, but does not demur significantly on unemployment; he concludes that Murray is unnecessarily pessimistic.

In his spirited rejoinder, Murray reinforces the points he made in *Losing Ground*. There may well be functional elements at work in creating and perpetuating poverty, but individuals deepen and replicate this poverty, so creating a culture that reinforces oppressive structures. The individual, he says, may not be responsible for his or her own poverty, but it does not follow that the solution to that poverty does not rest with the individual.

The book is well constructed and lively, and captures the important polarities of the debate. But it should be remembered that the concept of an urban underclass of alienated, unassimilable people is a construct: it is a way of describing reality that fits some, but not all, of the facts, and some, but not all, of the time.

