

Graham Willett (Ed.)

Thinking Down Under

Australian Politics, Society and Culture in Transition

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WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier

Thinking Down Under:
Australian Politics, Society and Culture in Transition /
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Trier : WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2006
ISBN 978-3-88476-855-6

Cover design: Brigitta Disseldorf

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ISBN 978-3-88476-855-6

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WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier
Bergstraße 27, 54295 Trier
Postfach 4005, 54230 Trier
Tel.: (0651) 41503, Fax: 41504
Internet: <http://www.wvttrier.de>
E-Mail: wvt@wvttrier.de

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	vii
I Introduction <i>Graham Willett</i>	1
II ‘MUA: Here to Stay!’ An Outsider on the Picket Lines <i>Sean Butler</i>	5
III ‘They’re so Australian’: Alan Seymour’s Revision of Australian Identity <i>Francesco Cattani</i>	21
IV Majority Rules: Rights Protection in Modern Australia <i>John Chesterman</i>	29
V Acting Up: AIDS and the Politics of Direct Action <i>Michael K. Connors</i>	45
VI Australian Public Schools and the Eloquent Fiction of the Free Market <i>Martin Forsey</i>	59
VII The Effects of Socio-Economic Changes in Australia, 1984-2004 <i>Lech Keller-Krawczyk</i>	75
VIII ‘Welcome to my Dreaming Place’: Landscape, Identity and Settler Belonging in Contemporary Australia <i>Jane Mulcock</i>	87
IX Citizen to Customer: The Transformation of Victoria in the 1990s <i>Vivienne Nicholson</i>	105

X	From Public to Private: Economic Rationalism and Affordable Housing for Indigenous and Low-Income South Australians <i>David Roberts</i>	119
XI	Re-Iterated Arrivals: Re-Enacting Cook’s First Voyage of Discovery on Board <i>The Ship</i> <i>Anja Schwarz</i>	135
XII	‘Things Haven’t Been the Same Since the Grim Reaper Came Knocking’: AIDS as an Agent of Change <i>Paul Sendziuk</i>	155
XIII	<i>Most</i> [The Bridge] Intermedia Performance <i>Tatjana Šešerko</i>	173
XIV	The <i>New Matilda</i> Project: How Much Can an Online Political Magazine Add to the Debate and Develop Policy? <i>Helen Smith</i>	183
XV	Refugees, Cricket and Trust: Spare Rooms for Refugees <i>Helen Smith</i>	195
XVI	‘Two Steps Forward, One Step Back’: Australian Multiculturalism during the Howard Years <i>Gwenda Tavan</i>	207
XVII	Contemporary Australian Cinema and the Grotesque <i>Inga von Kurnatowski</i>	221
XVIII	What the Right Got Right <i>Graham Willett</i>	231
	List of Contributors	245

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due first to the *Deutscher Akademischer Austausch-Dienst* (German Academic Exchange Service) whose Visiting Lecturer Program funded my appointment at the Freie Universität during 2005 and 2006, as well as the conference and this volume. Their generosity is appreciated.

I am also grateful to Professor Russell West-Pavlov who initiated and hosted my visit and was very supportive of the conference, even when, as it turned out, he was unable to attend it. His connections into the German publishing industry brought me and WVT together and have made this volume possible. Tjane Hartenstein undertook the early production work and laid sound foundations for the final product. (Any errors and typos are, however, my responsibility alone.)

Above all I want to thank those who presented papers at the conference and who then worked to very tight deadlines to prepare them for publication. Academics and activists, rumours to the contrary notwithstanding, work long and hard, and I am sure my pleading, demanding, hectoring, tampering, ‘wondering if maybe ...’ while they all had many other demands on their time, did not make this an easy process. Their efforts and good humour are appreciated.

I

INTRODUCTION

Graham Willett

To say that Australia looms large in the consciousness of Europe would be no exaggeration; it would be, on the contrary, simply untrue. Most Europeans never give Australia a moment's thought from one year to the next. Those who do, draw upon a melange of tourist promotion images and newsworthy events. Australia is a big country, a long way away. It is deserts and beaches and something called the Outback. Friendly, relaxed. It is Uluru (usually still called Ayers Rock) and the Sydney Opera House. German tourists get murdered there, dingos take babies, the Simpsons went there once... The *Tampa* looms large. The Cronulla race riot was extensively covered on the news, and watched with horror. The more political, and the slightly older, remember Pauline Hanson. The younger often know that Kylie is an Aussie. All in all, a pretty mixed picture.

Academically, there is some interest and presence, and both are growing. But to date attention has tended to be focused on literature, film and cultural studies, with a smattering of Indigenous Studies. History and politics as such don't get much of a look in. Which is a shame, because, without overstressing this, I do think that Australia has something to say to Europe. Among the neo-liberalisers here, the experience of the Labor governments especially has been widely noted. The transition of Australia from a social democratic and social liberal to an ever-more purely neo-liberal society has gone so smoothly that some of its innovations, like the deferred payment student-fees system, HECS, and the immigration-by-points system, have been adopted or are under active consideration in a number of countries. Analyses of the consequences of these changes ought to be of at least as much value to those considering, implementing or opposing them.

So when I found myself with money for an Australian studies conference in Berlin (itself a small sign perhaps of a growing interest), I decided on something that would emphasise those aspects of Australian life that didn't get much notice but which would, I thought, be a useful contribution to local knowledge

and Australian visibility. I decided to organise a conference that would focus on Australian politics and society, and on the transformations that they have undergone in recent decades. The result was a small but lively gathering of presenters (mostly from Australia) and of local students with an interest in the Land Down Under. The secondary result was this volume.

The conference went under the title of ‘On the Right Path?’ and so it was no surprise that many of the papers focussed on the nature, scope and impact of this socio-economic and political transformation. What might be surprising, to some, perhaps, was the thoughtful and considered way that the presenters had done their work. We academics are so used to being berated by the head-kickers of the neo-liberal right for our whining, our stuck-in-the-sixties attitudes, our refusal to face facts or to acknowledge that a new world is emerging all around us – we are so used to hearing this that it is easy to assume that it is true. These papers show scholars and activists working with care, and producing much more nuanced views of what is going on than we are often given credit for.

From big-picture pieces to micro-studies, what these papers have in common is precisely a willingness to ferret out the facts by serious research, to face those facts without flinching, and to make sense of them. The big issues of everyday life are all here – unemployment, education and housing. So too are political shake-ups and constitutional debates. AIDS, refugees, multiculturalism and the rise of the right all get their due attention. The conference did not avoid the cultural; how could it? The book includes some reflections on this, including pieces from German students Anja Schwarz and Inga von Kurnatowski who have studied in Australia and bring us their insights as outsiders. Tatjana Šešerko in her discussion of two performance pieces deals directly with issues of insider/outsider as someone who comes from the former Yugoslavia and is currently living in Australia.

The book also includes three papers that were not presented at the conference. An earlier project to produce a collection of reflections by political activists had to be aborted when no Australian publisher could be found. I am glad to be able to include the chapters that were written for it in its early stages – on ACTUP, Spare Rooms for Refugees, and the Maritime Union of Australia (‘wharfies’) dispute. These papers highlight the role of passion and commitment in Australian public and political life, which is often hinted at in the other chapters, but is here made explicit.

In worrying at the problem of how to arrange the papers I found myself with numerous options for grouping them by theme, topic, methodology. Many of the papers are, of course, written within the political science tradition. Gwenda