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Liberals and Conservatives

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Liberals and Conservatives

Ken Inglis (ed.), Nation, the life of an independent journal of opinion, 1958-1972, MUP, Carlton, 1989, \$24.95;

D.A. Kemp, Foundations for Australian Political Analysis: Politics and Authority, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1988, \$29.95.

John McLaren

Although these two books both come from the mainstream of Australian liberalism, they represent very different elements in that stream. Kemp would agree with the editors and contributors to Nation on the desirability of granting paramountcy to reason in the conduct of human affairs. There, however, their agreement ends. While the Nation writers generally believed in applying reason to the construction of government policies and structures which would nurture a society characterised by justice and civilization, Kemp believes that the best society we can attain will arise only when we give up expectations of government nurture and apply reason to the pursuit of our individual affairs. Nation belongs in the tradition of John Stuart Mill, tempered by elements of Rousseau. Kemp keeps strictly to the single vision of Newton and Locke, implicitly consigning Rousseau, Blake and the rest of the romantics to a First Circle

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presided over by the ghost of Whitlam. Nation published the kind of rational liberal thought which undermined the troglodytes of the ALP and made way for the brief alliance of new culture and old enlightenment which brought Whitlam to power on a wave of hope. Kemp belongs to the new scepticism of the right which seeks to sweep away the last relics of statism in a wave of despair.

It must however be said that Kemp wears his scepticism lightly. Once values are consigned to the rubbish-bin of the subjective, the pursuit of a Ferrari seems as rational as the quest for social justice or a sustainable economy. This shift away from the possibility of either objective or agreed values is accomplished on the first page, where Kemp defines all life as politics and all politics as the reduction of uncertainty in realising individual values. From this definition the rest follows: the need for a free market, the denial of any collective role to trade unions, the dismantling of government, the restriction of welfare service to emergency assistance, the reduction of the arts to the commodity of entertainment. ^{Kemp concentrates on} the role of the government ^{which} is reduced to the maintenance of national sovereignty, the dissolution of constraints of trade arising from monopoly or combination, and the enforcement of contracts and public order. The logic is impeccable, once you accept its assumptions. It is therefore unfortunate that, in the first book which seeks to ^{provide the basis of an} ~~define~~ the ideology ^{for} of the new right in Australia, Kemp chooses not to argue for these assumptions, which are fundamental to his case.

Nation is open to a different criticism. Like Kemp, its

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writers, and the editor, assume a logical position outside the constraints of the immediate politics. Writers from the new culture which succeeded them argued cogently that such no such position is possible. At a time when language, the fundamental instrument of logic, has been irredeemably corrupted by power, we can trust only the subjective, the first person account. Kemp takes this argument to its logical conclusion by accepting that no truth exists outside the subjective, and that self-interest is all that remains. His logic is an instrument to implement the rule of the subject, but to be effective he has to reduce this subject to an arithmetic abstraction. Just as Hume, determined to take reason to its conclusion, discovered that there is no reason, so Kemp, taking the subjective to its extreme, decides that ^{the} only self is reason. By contrast, writers of the new culture manage [^] to argue simultaneously that only the subject exists and that the subject is purely a social construct. From ^{their} ~~this~~ point of view, Nation unreasonably privileged reason. Its logical arguments for a rational and humane society were merely an expression of the interests of the new class of intellectuals who had created the prosperity of the Menzies years but were excluded from authority under his hegemony. Nation paved the way to the power which Whitlam eventually brought them, ^{although} ~~but~~ by then ^{spirit of} ~~and~~ ^{them} they had been absorbed into the more subjective and libertarian ~~and~~ libertarian Nation Review. This journal celebrated the spirit of the Whitlam years, but, lacking the cool rationalism of its predecessor, could not contribute the cool analysis the new government needed to keep its hubris in check.

In Kemp's ideal world, the hubris of the over-powerful

will always meet its nemesis in the market place. Although he admits that the market will never be completely equitable, and needs the checks and balances provided by representative democracy and the rule of law through a federal constitution, he argues that only ^{through} a market allowing the free exchange of property and the benefits accruing from it can individuals maintain a degree of autonomy against the power of governments, corporations and trade unions.

The problem with this ideal world is that, despite the objective stance of the political scientist, it is a purely ideological construct. Kemp himself acknowledges that his work, like any other, is an intervention in the political process, designed to increase his own autonomy and reduce the power of those who seek to encroach on it. He does not, however, take this acknowledgement to the extent of admitting either his own position as a member of the new class of apparatchiks; a professor deciding curricula, a political advisor determining the agenda, ~~or~~ a parliamentary candidate acting to make his ideals prevail. These involvements in fact add to the authority of his writing, particularly ^{when} he ^{describes} the evolution and function of the role of ministerial advisor. Kemp, however, chooses to omit any reference to the part he himself played in this process, claiming instead the deceptive authority of the expert rather than the real authority he has of observant participant.

Kemp's decision to write in the voice of the impartial academic conceals the real experience and passion which give his book so much of its value. He has a genuine hatred for ^{the}

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stupidities of unions, the tyranny of governments, ^{and} the obfuscations of bureaucracies ^f which interfere with the ability of individual citizens to get on with their own lives. Or rather, with the possibility of the citizen to get on with his life. Kemp acknowledges that the politics of authority and autonomy ~~and authority~~ pervade all parts of our lives, ^{including family life,} ~~and dedicates his book to his wife,~~ but he does not question the rights of parents to dominate their children, or consider whether the supposedly equitable distribution of power and income in Australia may exclude most women. Feminists appear in his analysis only as an example of a pressure group outside the proper economic framework.

The choice of authorial voice, and the framework of supposed economic rationalism, are part of the book's implicit claim to be ~~the~~ the definitive of the problem of politics in Australia. This claim rests on its opening, and restrictive, definition of politics as the reduction of uncertainty in the pursuit of personal values. This reduction is then considered in the context of an unchanging [✓] conflict between autonomy and authority. We want autonomy to pursue our values, but accept authority if it reduces uncertainty. As individuals, we try to use our positions of power to extend our autonomy, and are thus caught up in the constant attempt to capture authority from others in order to pursue our own ends. Kemp applies this analysis, often with illuminating effect, to every level of authority, from the crown to the courts to parliament, ^{formal} business and the unions. As a heuristic device, it works brilliantly ^{to} enable him to describe the practicalities of politics as they

apply to elections, parliamentary leadership and government. As a hermeneutics, it is fatally flawed by its attempt to reduce human political motives to a calculus of advantage.

This attempt blinds Kemp to his own motives, which appear to be a ^{healthy} distrust of authority and a belief in both the right and the power of individuals to decide their own fate. He quite properly assumes the agreement of his readers with this right, but avoids engaging ^{directly} in the question of power. His argument deals only with the way institutions exercise power against individuals, or with the way individual interests usurp the power of ^{di} individuals. Nowhere does he engage with the issue ~~either~~ of the way institutions, such as trade unions, enlarge the power of individuals, and he seems completely unaware of the way in which collective action, the satisfaction of working with others in a common cause, can itself be an individual value. His book thus excludes from consideration the whole fields of the arts and of play, and most of sport.

These exclusions lead to greater problems. Sometimes these are mere errors of fact, as when he describes the unions of "secondary" teachers as "among the largest and most powerful in the country" (p.388). Sometimes they lead to misrepresentation, as when he cites Creighton Burns's worries about the wide business interests of the proprietors of The Age as an argument against government (pp.386-7). Sometimes they are tautologies masquerading as axioms, as when he states that "In a free market employment opportunity is best achieved by action to advance the competitive prospects of the enterprise and its profitability" (p.397). As he has already defined free market to exclude any

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other type of action, the conclusion inevitably follows, but it does not tell us whether employment, or the share of employees in the product, will actually increase. From this point of view, unions inevitably represent a restraint on the free market, and are thus a bad thing. Kemp does not, however, attempt to show why joint-stock companies are not similarly a restraint on trade. *He argues only that they* ~~They~~ were necessary to increase investment, just as the resumption of common lands was necessary to increase production. He does not stop to consider whether other measures, such as the enfranchisement of the common people, were available to reach the same ends, nor does he seem to realize that both these examples contradict his argument for property rights and a free market.

This refusal to take alternatives seriously mars an otherwise acute critique of the theory and practice of trade unions in Australia. Kemp rightly points out how the unions, by pursuing a narrow sectional interest which does not necessarily represent even the views of their members, risk destroying the public consensus on which ultimately they rely for their authority. He applies this analysis particularly to the teachers' unions, which he shows have consistently pursued a set of values which are denied by the majority of the parents who are ultimately their clients. He then generalizes from this to argue that no union has ever shown any interest in "policies contributing to greater flexibility in the society, and thus to innovation, change and adaptability" (p.412). Yet the reason teachers' unions have diverged from the general consensus over the last twenty years is precisely because *f* they have sought a greater flexibility which, for the same period, the conservative

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forces have opposed. Kemp's claims about standards in education and accountability of teachers merely repeat ~~this~~ ^{the} reactionary drive ^{of} conservative commentators.

Even in his own terms, his argument that unions do not want change does not stand up. He cites the "ideological publications of the Australian Metal Workers Union" as an example of union leaderships being ahead of the thinking of their members (p.393), but appears not to notice that these publications advocate the kind of industrial restructuring he advocates elsewhere. Nor does he recognize the Accord as an example of innovative union thinking, but cites it ^{rather} as an example of the [^] improper use of power by unions and government. Instead of examining the contradiction between this kind of economic planning and the government's simultaneous deregulation of finance, he blames the Accord, and government spending, ^{for} ~~for~~ Australia's overseas debt. At no time does he examine the propensity of private business to borrow overseas in order to ^{finance} ~~finance~~ its own speculation and monopolisation.

The problem seems to be that for Kemp any suggestion emanating from a union is ^{improper} ~~invalid~~ ^{invalid} because their claim to collective authority is, as he demonstrates, flawed. Similarly, he shows the difficulties of holding the managers of public enterprises to accountability for their actions. But he makes no similarly rigorous examination of the claims to collective authority ^{by} ~~of~~ management. He does glance at the separation of ownership from control, but he does not ask how it is possible for the managers of a business to manoeuvre themselves into a very profitable ownership. He does not consider the role of

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collectives like the mutual assurance societies, and the way their managers have usurped power from their contributors and used it to insulate other corporate managers from public scrutiny. Had he asked these questions, he may well have been forced to conclude that, for all their failings, public ~~and collective~~ enterprises are more accountable than private. But ^{Conclusion} this would have destroyed his argument.

The issue Kemp's book raises is how, given the uncertainty and self-contradiction of the community values he cites, any democratic government can satisfy ^{both} ~~either~~ its supporters ^{and} ~~or~~ the generality of the Australian electorate. Implicitly, Kemp abandons this question and leaves it to the market place of the electorate, although he gives an illuminating analysis of the way the electorate can be manipulated into conniving at the destruction of its own hopes. It is this despair of rationality which marks him as one of the new right and so distinguishes him from the liberal tradition he seeks to capture. This tradition has, admittedly, been weak in Australian politics, which have more commonly veered between the lazy conformism of a Menzies and the moral absolutism of destructive zealots like Bjelke Petersen or the H.R. Nicholls Society, praised by David Kemp. The record of Nation shows there is another way.

^{This} The fortnightly journal of opinion and reportage, ~~Nation,~~ was held together by no ideology apart from a common commitment to the importance of ideas. Its contributors ranged from genuine conservatives like Geoffrey Fairbairn to turbulent communists like Judah Waten. But this conversation of so many voices was based on the assumption that freedom depended on rationality, and

procured the practical effects, which no journal dependent on the market place rather than on the commitment of its owner and contributors could do, of changing the intellectual climate of Australia. ^aNation's competitor, the Observer, and its successor, The Bulletin, brought together a similar array of voices, but they were, and are, subject to the whims of a proprietor with strong views and wide business interests, and so can never provide the free and dispassionate analysis that Nation brought for an all-too-short fourteen years. Re-reading this selection reminds us not only of what we have lost in its demise, but of how pertinent so many of its contributions remain.

Take, for example, Ken Inglis's 1959 article on the Rupert Stuart case. The recent book by Alex Castles on the law in South Australia identifies this as a watershed in the development of that state's legal systems from a reliance on colonial and patriarchal precedents to an awareness of contemporary society. Inglis's ^caccount, read in conjunction with reports of the enquiry into Aboriginal deaths in custody, reminds us of how far as a society we still have to go. Articles like Hugh Stretton's on universities or Tom Fitzgerald's on manufacturing and protection remain as relevant, and as unheeded, today as when they were written. At the same time, the continuing note in the editorials of frustration at political debate and the lack of political thought reminds us of the intellectual ~~inertia~~ which blanketed the years of Menzies government. ✓

Ken ~~Inglis's~~, the editor provides a general introduction to the book and introductory remarks to each chronological ✓

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section. Together, these provide not only a history of the journal but a biographical tribute to the two remarkable men, Tom Fitzgerald and George Munster, who created and sustained it. Their values were rock steady, but they never obtained any certainty in achieving them, either in their own journal nor in the daily papers to which they both made distinguished contributions. Both their values and their achievements lie quite outside the scope of Kemp's narrowly rationalistic view of the world.