Notes on the Launch: Nugget Coombs: A Reforming Life*
Tim Rowse (Cambridge University Press 2002 ISBN 0 521 81783 8, $59.95)

The contemporary biographer faces new problems. One of them was called to mind in a recent remark by Andrew Stephenson in the Sydney Morning Herald. He was reviewing the valuable television series Australian Biography by Robin Hughes. According to Stephenson, a print biography faces special difficulties in today’s world where it must compete with the magic of filmed and sound recordings of the subject.

To illustrate this point, Stephenson instances the filmed interview with Dr HC Coombs. Asked whether he had any disappointments in his life — which had spanned most of the 20th century and seen him in a great many important national offices — ‘Nugget’ Coombs paused. He delayed his answer. The seconds ticked by. The passing time and the anguish on his face, as he reviewed his life, spoke hundreds of words. In the end, he responded to the question by saying that his greatest disappointment was the failure to deliver justice to the Aboriginal people of Australia. The power of the facial expressions, voice and pause said more about Coombs than many pages in a printed biography. Perhaps future biographies will be issued with a CD Rom, so that the reader can explore the images of the subject under the microscope of cyberspace.

A second difficulty is that people are living longer. HC Coombs is an illustration. He lived to his 92nd year. Death at an early age can be a great boon to biographers. John Kennedy was a case in point. Under Australia’s strict defamation laws this is no small matter. Death puts the subject, and the subject’s family, beyond the protection of the courts’ defamation lists. But when people live longer they run the risk of out-living their relevance. They may out-live their friends who can give insights into their achievements and character. Worse still, they may out-live the interest of anybody concerning their lives. In today’s world, a list of public achievements, unless grounded in some larger story, is likely to be a bore, honoured but rarely read — like the opinions of most of the judges of fifty years ago.

A third difficulty had to be faced by Tim Rowse in this book about HC Coombs. Coombs was a relic of an earlier, gentler time, when the privacy of public officials (even politicians) was normally regarded as sacrosanct. Their sexual peccadillos, family differences and even flaws of personal character were commonly regarded as their own business, not the public’s. Clearly, this was the view that Coombs himself took. He discouraged biographers. He only agreed to cooperate with Rowse on the footing that there would be no intrusion into his personal life. Rowse agreed to these terms and he faithfully discharged his promise. He steered clear of the inner enigma of HC Coombs. The result is a biography that is unusual by modern standards.

In the National Portrait Gallery in London is a marvellous painting of Oliver Cromwell. We have all heard of ‘warts and all’. But according to Walpole, the full text of what Cromwell told his portraitist was more revealing:

Mr Lely, I desire you would use all your skill to paint my picture truly like me; and not to flatter me at all — but remake all these roughnesses and pimples, warts and everything you see in me; otherwise I shall never pay you a farthing.

The Lord Protector was a soldier and a politician. By every account, he was an unusual man. In this sense, Coombs was much more orthodox. He forbade interviews with his wife Mary (‘Lallie’) and other members of his family. The result, as Rowse admits, is a biography with an insufficient portrait of the inner sanctum of the public man. This led to certain divisions in the Coombs family, recorded by the author. Two of the great man’s children, Janet and Jim, disagreed with the condition laid down by their father. They did not want hagiography but a true record with a rounded picture. Rowse has consciously refrained from giving us this. He is perfectly candid about it. He cites three pass-
ages in the book as the best he could do to offer the ‘real man’ while sticking to his undertaking. These are pretty unrevealing. One of them is little more than an analogy Coombs drew between the ‘family’ of the bank that he led and the families of the bankers. Perhaps Rowse is telling us that Coombs was so absorbed in his professional activities that his wife and progeny had to take a back seat. If so, it is all rather obscure.

Having confessed to these unusual features of his work, Rowse attempts to make a virtue of necessity. He concentrates on the public history, with the big themes and issues of the life of this quintessential officer of the Commonwealth. There are certain advantages in this course in an age that is so obsessed with trivia, personality and entertainment. The down side of the electronic media, so praised by Andrew Stephenson, is that, as practised, they tend to encourage superficialities, banalities and scandals. They are vivid, noisy and visual. Rowse has disdained this. In the result, his book, though incomplete, has an interest all of its own. In a sense, it is an economic history of Australian life during the past century, with some large social themes woven in, especially in the latter chapters.

The book opens with an explanation of how Herbert Cole Coombs got the nickname ‘Nugget’. There is a lot of speculation that it referred to a nugget of gold in the minefields of Western Australia, near where Coombs was born in 1906. Coombs, who did not much like the name, considered this explanation rubbish. He was small and thus ‘nuggety’. It was no more than that. So, from his schooldays, he became ‘Nugget’ — but not to his family, who called him ‘Bertie’. If anything, he hated his given name even more. One suspects that this physical attribute of the man was appreciated by the informant in contrast to the seriously reserved Hasluck who would later become Governor-General.

Coombs returned to Australia in 1935 and began work at the head office of the Commonwealth Bank in Martin Place, Sydney. Thus began one of the great careers in Australian banking. His return coincided with the establishment of the Royal Commission into Banking. Coombs was closely involved in the preparation of the Bank’s submissions. He got to know JB Chifley. He was forced to clarify his own thinking on the role of an Australian central bank. Coombs, who was not strictly a Keynesian, nonetheless believed in strong powers for the Bank and a firm hold on monetary policy. His early career, and academic studies, had required him to sort out the relationship between economics and politics. It made him face up to a puzzle that Rowse explores: how to reconcile the functions of a professional public service with the necessities of a popularly elected government.

When World War II came along, Coombs was appointed to implement the national system of rationing for essential goods. Later, Chifley, by then the first minister for Postwar...
Reconstruction, selected Coombs as Director-General of his department. In such chance ways do personal associations play a great role in the provision of opportunities to shine.

It was in his functions during the war that Coombs saw the large economic potential of women and the injustice of their differing economic rewards. He was an early proponent of the rights of women to equal opportunities. In fact, he was often in advance of general economic and social thinking. But as Rowse points out, he was no revolutionary, in terms of economic theory. On the contrary, he regarded inflation, encouraged by the industrial relations system, as a big enemy to the success of the Australian market economy. He often had difficulty resolving his perceptions of economic theory with the duties he owed to elected politicians. Rowse explains how the allies of protectionism were not confined to the Labor Party. Many members of the Country Party, led by Arthur Fadden, had similar or identical views.

In 1949, in the last days of the Chifley government, Coombs was appointed Governor of the Commonwealth Bank. In this role, he had to combine the functions of the chief executive of a central bank and of a major trading and savings bank. At about the same time, Coombs had been offered the Vice-Chancellorship of the Australian National University, then in the course of establishment. He preferred banking; but he kept his hand in the university, playing a major part in its formation. He was in due course to become its Chancellor.

The end of 1949 saw the return of Menzies as prime minister. He retained Coombs on the bank but was under pressure to separate the central bank function. Modest changes were introduced in 1953. Coombs thought they went far enough. At least initially, he favoured retaining a link with trading bank functions. In due course, the complete separation was enacted, not without some rear guard opposition from the Country Party that distrusted the private banks. Coombs became the first governor of the Reserve Bank. Privately, he agreed with the view of the Menzies government that inflation was a curse and a burden on ordinary workers. One of his last banking functions was to initiate the change to decimal currency. Many Australians of my age remember the neat copperplate inscription of his name on the banknotes. Perhaps symbolically, the new dollar note contained a somewhat avant-guard representation of Aboriginal motifs. In this, Coombs was heralding two of the big interests of his post-retirement life.

In the last days of the McMahon government, HC Coombs was summoned out of retirement by Gough Whitlam who made him an economic adviser. When Whitlam became prime minister in 1972, Coombs was given a number of responsibilities. Between 1974 and 1976 he chaired the Royal Commission into Government Administration. Together with Peter Wilenski, he recommended major reforms designed to enhance the opportunities for women in the federal public sector. But it was the recommendations of the Commission in favour of removing tenure for the top public servants that probably brought about the greatest change. This was Coombs’ belated solution to the puzzle of reconciling cool professionalism with accountable democracy. In his late years he became more convinced that departmental chiefs should be agents of the elected government, to carry through their mandates. There was an irony in this for Coombs’ own career demonstrated how it was possible for a top official to work comfortably and enthusiastically for governments of different political stripes.

Coombs became disillusioned with the Whitlam government. He was distressed at Gough’s relative lack of interest in economics. He was shocked by the Kemlani affair. But like many others, he was horrified at the dismissal of the government by Sir John Kerr in November 1975.

Rowse’s biography brings out the many faceted activities in which Coombs was engaged in the 20 years before his death in October 1997. These included his involvement in issues concerning women’s rights, art, music, ballet and culture and the universities. But it was his involvement with Aboriginal and other indigenous people that became his great concern towards the end. He took an important part in the public discussions of the Australian Law Reform Commission when it investigated Aboriginal customary laws. It was at that time that I first met him. It was clear that he had an intellectual and emotional commitment to rectifying the perceived wrongs, of conduct and neglect, that had bedevilled the relationship of the Australian ‘Settlement’ with the indigenous people. Clearly, he felt that he had not done enough with his earlier opportunities. He dis-
played a great sense of impatience that somehow seemed out of place for a person who, better than most, knew the slow pace of change in the Australian democracy.

Towards the end, Coombs repeatedly returned to Aboriginal communities in the remote parts of Australia and spent much time with them. Clearly enough, this was a kind of spiritual journey for him. From them, he developed ideas that had been formulating in his mind during his period of power. Good economics, he concluded, meant prudent use of resources. Sustainability of those resources, which had been the key to the survival of Aboriginal Australians, had lessons for contemporary Australian society that Coombs was determined to teach. All of these big themes are well portrayed by Rowse.

So too are the values that motivated Coombs in his public life. He was very much an Australian. He never had much time for the Imperial connection. He took a large part in the postwar moves to create the new international economic institutions. These often saw Australia siding with the USA out of recognition of the waning influence of the British connection. Coombs loved cricket and football. In fact, he was a fit and energetic man. He hated pomposity and presumption.

For all that, Coombs had a very clear idea of his role as a public intellectual. Moreover, for him, economics was not a dismal science. On the contrary, it was a moral activity designed to ensure society, as far as possible against a repetition of the Great Depression. Coombs came from humble origins. He never forgot them.

His belated involvement in the world of art and culture (he became chair of the Australia Council in 1973) brought him some joy. But not too much. He confessed that it took him a long time to appreciate Bach — and that in an economist seems astonishing.

Throughout his service HC Coombs demonstrated a tolerance for diverse opinions that reflected the Australian suspicion of extremes. During the anti-communist hysteria in Australia in the 1950s, both in public office and at the ANU, he resisted the fanatics. It seems easy today, looking back on this, to understand his moderation. Yet at the time, it was principled and courageous.

As Coombs got older, he became more and more disenchanted with the political landscape. On the last page of his book, tantalisingly, Rowse refers to Coombs’ John Curtin Lecture in 1984 warning the Australian Labor Party against what he saw as its trend to conservatism in matters affecting ‘nuclear war, Aborigines and unemployment’. He suggested that ‘the political vacuum on the Left will be filled, perhaps for a while, by single issue or splinter parties but before long by a more radical party outside the Labor Party’. This has not happened; although recent elections suggest that there may be something in his idea.

There are a few small errors in what is otherwise a beautifully presented book. For example, the retired judge who investigated tax reform is described as ‘Judge’ (he was retired ‘Justice’) Asprey on p.305. Sir Gerard Brennan is wrongly called ‘Gerald’ on p.348. However, these are trifles. The endnotes, bibliography and index are superb and the photographs evocative and plentiful.

This brings me back to where I started. This biography does not uncover the enigma of H C Coombs, the man. Professor John Passmore, who worked with him in many large enterprises, especially in the ANU, acknowledged to Tim Rowse that he did not know what made Coombs tick. The self-denying ordinance which the author accepted as the price of Coombs’ cooperation, closed off many compartments. Coombs was brought up an Anglican. But his wife was a teenage convert to Catholicism — the religion in which the children were raised. There may still be time for Rowse to jettison his puritanical observance of Nugget Coombs’ wishes. Encouraged by a little Jesuitical reasoning, to the effect that death has released him from his promise, he may yet plumb the depths of Coombs the man. This is a fine intellectual biography. For an insight into the mystery of Coombs as a person, we must await a supplementary volume or another biographer willing to obey Cromwell’s injunction.

Note

Michael Kirby
Justice of the High Court
**Nugget Coombs: A Reforming Life**  

One comfort is, that Great Men, taken up in any way are profitable company. We cannot look, however imperfectly, upon a great man, without gaining something by him. He is the living light-fountain, which it is good and pleasant to be near.

Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes and Hero Worship*, Everyman edn (p.239).

In the judgment of Paul Hasluck, official historian of the civil side of the World War II, ‘most of the credit for war-time administration’ belonged to the senior public servants (*Diplomatic Witness*, Melbourne University Press, 1980:158).

One of those senior public servants was undoubtedly Herbert Cole Coombs, doctor of philosophy from the London School of Economics, director of rationing (1942–43), director-general of postwar reconstruction (1943–48), Governor, Commonwealth/Reserve Bank of Australia (1949–68), chair, Council for Aboriginal Affairs (1968–76), chair, the Royal Commission on Australian Government Administration (1974–76) and numerous other posts in the Australian National University, and in various arts bodies.

On any reckoning Coombs is among the top officials in Commonwealth history, along with Sir Robert Garran (Secretary, Attorney-General’s Department, 1901–32; Solicitor-General, 1917–32); Duncan McLachlan (Public Service Commissioner, 1902–16); Sir Harry Brown (Director-General of Posts and Telegraphs, 1923–39); Sir Frederick Shedden (Defence, 1937–56); Sir Roland Wilson (Secretary, the Treasury, 1952–66); Sir Arthur Tange (External Affairs, 1954–65; Defence, 1970–79); and Sir Frederick Wheeler (Chair, Public Service Board, 1960–71; Secretary Treasury, 1971–79).

For two decades from 1948 Coombs headed the central bank; for half that time it had a trading bank arm.

His post was composed of great powers, some of them statutory, derived from both government and business. His imperium thus pervaded both government and business. His influence, extending to the Australian National University and the arts through the Elizabethan Theatre Trust, was pervasive, active, largely free from public or even ministerial scrutiny, and, as well, provided him with the accommodation necessary for his peripatetic life-style and his unorthodox family situation.

After the bank he remained active in a variety of fields, Aboriginal affairs and the ANU (as chancellor), the arts and eventually environment politics and policy. For a few years he re-entered the field of economic policy. With-in public administration he is most remembered as head of the Whitlam government’s Task Force on the Continuing Expenditure Programs of the Previous Government, and the RCAGA.

In the private politics of Australian government Coombs is a major figure. He combined a high level talent for economics with an unusual breadth and interest in policy matters. He was possessed of a charm and wit that set him apart from many of his peers. His company had a relaxed quality that made him attractive to most of his political masters.

Though he eschewed such formalities of acknowledgment as a knighthood which his service would readily have attracted, he yearned for recognition. Some of his contemporaries marveled at his talent for being ‘inconspicuously conspicuous’. Others were more pointed: in a highly competitive field, he was nevertheless seen as ‘the greatest self-publicist in the history of the Australian public service’. He almost rivalled Sir Donald Bradman in his gift for managing a public reputation.

His is a career well worth recording, studying and analysing. And though some acclaimed Australian publishers have dismissed the commercial viability of a biography of Coombs (or Garran), Cambridge University Press fortunately have not. They have produced a volume authored by Tim Rowse, Professor of History, Research School of Social Sciences, ANU, so handsome that Coombs, with his aversion for respectability — conventional respectability anyway — might have disapproved.

It is a rich volume in its survey of Australian government and the various intellectual forces shaping it in the years when Coombs was in the ascendancy, essentially the Keynesian era of public expenditure and public policy. But as a biography of Coombs the reader is reminded constantly of Bentley’s comment on Pope’s translation of Homer’s *Iliad*: ‘It is a pretty poem,
Mr Pope, but you must not call it Homer’ — a fascinating book, but is it a biography of Coombs?

The problem seems to have a number of sources. First and foremost is Coombs’s own reticence, his ‘dislike [of] being asked to defend or justify or to answer questions in which judgment is involved … Also such exercises inevitably, whether deliberately or by accident, intrude on “personal space” — attitudes, beliefs, relationships which I have tried to protect as private’ (p.ix).

There are several examples of the relations—ships between biographers and their subjects — the cooperative (Paul Strangio, Keeper of the Faith: A Biography of Jim Cairns, Melbourne University Press, 2002); The business-like but very distant (Robert Porter, Paul Hasluck: A Political Biography, UWA Press, 1993); or the hostile (David Marr, Barwick, Allen and Unwin, 1980). Rowse’s acquiescence in Coombs’s terms seem least satisfactory because they have such a highly inhibitory effect to the extent that Coombs loses much of his humanity. It is ironical that Coombs, so often the advocate of accountability and research, should, in his own case, seek a dispensation. Why could such matters not have been left to Rowse’s discretion?

A second problem is Rowse’s determination to cast Coombs in a predominantly academic/public intellectual mould. Coombs, as he recognised when he turned down the inaugural vice-chancellorship of the ANU, was a mandarin first and foremost — not a typical mandarin by any means, but a mandarin nonetheless. In this he is reminiscent of Alfred Deakin who, conscious that some of his admirers saw him as somehow divorced from politics, at least reminded himself that he actually was a politician, ‘capable (in his own words) of “all the tactics, contrivings, plots, and counterplots and personal relations involved”’ (quoted C Hartley Grattan, The Southwest Pacific Since 1900: A Modern History, University of Michigan Press, 1963). Coombs could possibly have thought in similar terms of himself.

The third problem is that so much of the book is composed in portentous terms which, again, drive out the humanity. On universities readers learn that Coombs’s ‘conception … continued to be unresolved — between a faith in the usefulness of knowledge to government and an aspiration to soar beyond the vision of political elites’ (emphasis added) (p.178). After a visit to Papua New Guinea he sends the administrator not a list of practical suggestions (as they are) but, in Rowse’s words, ‘a vision’ (p.238). Portrayal of Coombs in these terms makes him hardly recognisable as the plain-speaking person he was.

A final issue is Rowse’s apparent reluctance to appraise Coombs’s many contributions except largely in nostalgic terms of whether the 1940s were an ‘unrepeatable golden age’. Notwithstanding his reservations, Coombs was an apostle of the Keynesian gospel and an advocate of big government. But might the universities, or the arts, be today more robust had they not, in the 1950s and 1960s, been so drawn under the wing of government? It is just not a question Rowse examines.

The net effect of these inhibitions and intellectual wrappings is not a conventional biography but one in which Rowse has ‘presented Coombs’s public life as a series of attempts to answer the question: how can liberal government draw heavily on the expertise of policy intellectuals while continuing to honour popular sovereignty’ (p.2).

But this and related questions do not intrude excessively on Rowse’s exploration of numerous episodes in Coombs’s career from its high points in the 1940s and 1950s, passing through the affluence of the 1960s, to the 1970s and 1980s when so much could no longer be taken for granted.

Even so, the consequence of Rowse’s abstract approach is that the reader is not given much of a feel for the circumstances of government in the mid-20th century. Not only is the kind of portrait provided by Paul Hasluck in Diplomatic Witness missing, so also are personal insights — Coombs’s reaction to the death of Curtin, the defeat of Chifley, Evatt’s emergence as Labor leader, Calwell’s near win in 1961, or even the advent of the Whitlam government.

The story, oft-told by Professor LF Crisp, of Coombs’s warm first meeting with Treasurer Arthur Fadden after the 1949 election when the latter had targetted the former in the campaigning finds no place in this book. More seriously is the handling of Coombs’s role in Chifley’s decision to nationalise the banks: ‘Coombs did not want Chifley to nationalise the banking system’ (p.187). But there is no account of Chifley’s meeting with his top officials on the Friday afternoon (15 August 1947) before the fateful cabinet at the weekend when the
decision to nationalise was endorsed. None of the officials present (including Coombs) spoke when the prime minister confided his plans. There were many questions that even 'responsive' officials should have asked. Chifley himself could well have been interested in Coombs’s views on implementation of the policy. As Rowse reports: ‘In *Trial Balance* he [Coombs] said that he would have made such alterations to the senior levels of the private banks as would have enabled them “to continue their operations with little change”’ (p.190).

*AJPA* readers will be especially interested in Rowe’s coverage of the RCAGA. It is dealt with very briefly and, again, there is an intellectual gloss on this central event in the history of the Australian public service at odds with the accessibility of actual events.

Rowse reports that chairmanship of RCAGA provided Coombs with the ‘opportunity to theorise this work of mediation — that is, of making more diverse and complex the connections between the political elite and their subjects’ (p.7). But in *Trial Balance* Coombs himself says that he did not treat proposals that he head the royal commission seriously. It was only after a ‘mildly acrimonious discussion’ with Treasury secretary Wheeler at lunch at the Commonwealth Club that he decided to accept the post (*Trial Balance* (p.318)). For the first year of its life Coombs, save for a few familiar topics (including Treasury control of public expenditure), was as much engaged as anyone in searching for a constructive role and rationale for RCAGA.

The RCAGA report, according to Rowe, ‘postulated a new ideal of the public servant — the “responsive public servant”’. The responsive public servant ‘was not simply an anonymous servant and adviser of the Minister, but an active agent, enabling and sustaining a channel of communication, and helping to adapt the interlocuters — government and social interest — to the demands of their dialogue’. This may be an accurate summary of the Report’s intentions but it is certainly easier to grasp its meaning by reading the relevant parts of the report itself (paras 2.2.9–2.2.15, 15–7; and 6.3, 137 ff).

In addition to the ‘new ideal’ Rowe’s main interest in RCAGA is the employment of women in government. This is one of several occasions where Rowe puts the case for seeing Coombs in the vanguard of recognising and promoting women’s interests but the result is ambiguous. He points out that the Reserve Bank Act was one of the first pieces of Commonwealth legislation not to include a prohibition on permanent employment of married women. Even so, the Reserve Bank was not an institution where women, married or single, prospered in Coombs’s time or for many subsequent years. And when Coombs remonstrated in the mid-1970s about the absence of women professors at the ANU, who would guess that for nearly three decades he had held leading positions of influence including pro-chancellor and chancellor.

In the case of the RCAGA, Rowe attributes a larger role to Coombs than was actually the case, and thereby misses some important aspects of his leadership style, especially the readiness with which he made space for others (at least juniors) to contribute. Advancement of women was an objective widely shared throughout the Commission. The matter was largely carried by female staff (often on a voluntary basis in addition to their primary research), commissioners including Coombs participating when needed (as in public hearings). Coombs himself devoted his energies to other matters which might else have been neglected. Aboriginalisation and science are examples of this ‘value-adding’.

More generally, coverage of RCAGA fails to do justice to its innovatory character. This is readily evident if RCAGA is compared to either of Canada’s big inquiries, Glassco (1962–65) or Lambert (1976–79), neither of which was open, public or as expeditious. Compared to New Zealand’s royal commission of the early 1960s or the Fulton committee in the UK (1966–68), the RCAGA had a marked breadth and a conspicuous research effort. As is evident not least in its various task forces, RCAGA went well beyond the conventional bounds of administrative inquiries. Coombs was not the sole reason for these features of RCAGA but there can be no doubt that under any other leadership the ambit of inquiry would have been markedly more restricted.

Once read, two questions confront the reader. Would the study of Australian government and public policy have been better served by a more conventional biography. The answer is probably yes. The abstract cloak of this volume obscures rather than enlightens. A
study in the style of David Horner’s work on Sir Frederick Shedden (Defence Supremo: Sir Frederick Shedden and the Making of Australian Defence Policy, Allen and Unwin 2000) could readily have accommodated much of the intellectual material without losing sight of the individual at the centre of the work.

Rowse himself seems not to have much faith in conventional biography: ‘My two books on Coombs should cause readers to doubt such personifying accounts of policy areas, paradigms and traditions’ (p.3).

This gives rise to a second question: has he been wise in using biography to tackle the various issues he identifies about rulers and the ruled, and experts and democratic government. Again, my inclination is to think he would have been better advised to address them directly, maybe in a volume about Australia comparable to JL Granatstein’s, The Ottawa Men (Toronto, Oxford University Press 1982). A collective portrait is a truer portrait so far as government is concerned for by its essence, even today, it is collegial — competitively collegial that is.

Coombs towers over government and policy in this study partly because many of his peers are denigrated (often by Coombs himself). Wheeler is described as ‘really good at drafting compromises’ (p.154). Rowse sees this as a compliment but in official cultures it is a put down. Rowse himself says that SG McFarlane’s avuncular letter to Coombs on his appointment to the Bank ‘seemed to congratulate not only Coombs but himself’ (p.160). Coombs is unlikely to have read it in that light. As the ANU was being established we find Coombs trying to ease arch rival Roland Wilson not only out of government but out of economics by commending him as professor of statistics as he was not ‘in the same class as either Kaldor or Melville as an economist’. Rowse reports that the chair in economics eventually went to Trevor Swan but not, though the reader is not told, before it was offered to Wilson. (see WK Hancock to Roland Wilson, 7 February 1949; and Wilson to Hancock, 25 February 1949).

Coombs’s lifelong tussle with the Treasury and its leading personalities, and his many stratagems (rarely successful) to clip their wings, is understated in this volume. But the intellectual story Rowse wants to tell would have had a much more dynamic telling had he tackled a joint study of Coombs and Wilson, perhaps entitled The Rivals. By such means readers could have gained a larger perspective on the policy debates about the role of government in the post-World War II years, the management of affluence and the fight against inflation. After all, it was by having these two gifted stars of the Commonwealth watch one another that Menzies, Roosevelt-like, kept his watch on economic policy. It also shows how one policy intellectual can keep another in check, thus ensuring that both remain servants of the democracy, and neither becomes master.

Even in death, Coombs has not been left in peace. For long, on the ANU campus, the Coombs building has been a major centre. But since 1999 there has been, within easy walking distance even on a hot summer’s day, the Sir Roland Wilson Building. The old rivals are still squaring off.

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No Weariness: The Memoir of a Generalist in Public Service in Four Continents, 1919–2000

Sam Scruton Richardson (Malt House Publishing, Wlye, Wiltshire, UK, 2001; copies available from University of Canberra Foundation, University of Canberra, Canberra, ACT 2601).

Sam Richardson was Foundation Principal of the Canberra College of Advanced Education, now the University of Canberra, from 1969 to 1984, and president of the International Association of Schools and Institutes of Administration (IASIA) from 1983 to 1986. He is co-founder and principal benefactor of the IPAA/University of Canberra Public Administration Research Trust Fund, a report on which is published elsewhere in this number of AJPA.

Now living in retirement in England — though he holds Australian citizenship — he has recorded in this book much about a remarkable career spent in public and military service in many parts of the world. The ‘four continents’ in the sub-title are Europe, Africa, Asia and Australia, and one of the abiding influences on
his life was the injunction he was given by an Arab Sheik of the nomad Kabbabish tribe, while he was a District Commissioner in the Sudan Political Service, that ‘in the Service of the Government there is No Weariness’. Hence the main title of this book, which is dedicated to Sylvia, his wife of 51 years, who was well known in Australia and died on 22 May 2000 as the writing was in its final stages.

Though born and educated in England, Richardson’s professional life was mostly spent elsewhere. War service, mostly in India and Burma, followed graduation from Oxford University, and when the war was over he joined the ranks of the Sudan Political Service, a variant of the British Colonial Service established to administer what was then an Anglo-Egyptian Condominium. He was drawn to the many-sided work of district administration away from the capital, rather than to policy work in the capital, and it was in Kordofan Province in the Western Sudan that he met and married Sylvia, who had come from England to teach in a local school. After Sudan’s independence, he moved on to similar district administration work in the regular Colonial Service in Northern Nigeria, and it was here that several other influences emerged to give shape to his future career and to the major contribution he would eventually make to public administration education in Australia and internationally.

Nigeria too was approaching independence. But the process there was complicated by changing federal arrangements which sought to accommodate significant tribal and religious differences, and it was unable to prevent political assassinations and a bitter civil war in the 1960s. Richardson, who had become a fluent Arabic speaker, found himself increasingly called on to assist Moslem leaders in Northern Nigeria in establishing a form of regional self-government within the federal system that would satisfy all the conflicting pressures. A significant part of the challenge was a legal one, finding a way to reform the native courts system and allow Sharia law to prevail in personal and family but not in criminal matters. While working in the northern districts and on spells of home leave, he undertook study in the Chancery Lane program and was called to the English Bar. Thereafter he made a major contribution to the drafting of the Northern Nigerian statute book, a contribution which was to rebound on him much later in life (and after service in Australia) when he was invited to take a prominent part in the revision of that statute book.

In Nigeria the lawyers and judges were overwhelmingly British, and the few locals in the field were British-educated. Here Richardson was confronted by the need to localise, a pressure felt urgently throughout the world of developing states in the 1960s and 1970s. There was already a small teaching facility in Zaria, a medieval walled city not far from the Northern Nigerian capital of Kaduna, and there he established a Department of Law in 1959. He became Director of the Zaria Institute of Administration in 1961, and thereafter developed it as a centre for public administration teaching with a strong practical emphasis, with American development-assistance support particularly from Donald Stone, Dean of the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs in the University of Pittsburgh. The Institute became a part of the new Ahmadu Bello University named after the Sardauna of Sokoto, Premier of the Northern Region, with whom Richardson worked closely, and who was soon to be assassinated. Sam found himself Acting Vice-Chancellor in the middle of a military coup in 1966; a year later, as his Nigerian service was drawing to a close, he was awarded the University’s Degree of Doctor of Laws honoris causa.

He then resisted the temptation to embark on an administrative career in Britain, and turned instead to set up a Department of Public Administration in the new University of Mauritius. There followed what he described as ‘an idyllic year in paradise’ (Chapter 22:title), for part of which time he was again Acting Vice-Chancellor. By now the main focus of his commitment to administrative education was apparent: he saw the need for quick programs to equip large numbers of the native-born in developing countries to undertake operational tasks often away from capitals, rather than the sort of leisurely, social science-based and fairly theoretical courses favoured by, for example, the University of Sussex in Britain. So, while he supported professional degree programs, he also believed that there was an important place in the university curriculum for shorter courses delivering diplomas and certificates rather than degrees, and that it was vitally important for the educators and trainers to work in close harmony with relevant public service leaders. In educa-
tional terms, his commitment was thus to institutions of applied learning rather than pure learning.

It was this sense of mission that drove him to join with Don Stone and some other like-minded people in the 1962 establishment of the International Association of Schools and Institutes of Administration (IASIA) as the education-focused affiliate of the Brussels-based International Institute of Administrative Sciences. Don Stone became its first president and Richardson gave strong support. When the Canberra College of Advanced Education, under Sam’s leadership, hosted IASIA’s annual conference in 1981, one of his greatest satisfactions was the participation of many administrators from developing countries that was supported financially by the then Australian International Development Assistance Bureau, the Commonwealth Secretariat in London and the German Foundation for International Development (for the record of this Conference, see Scott 1981). When Don Stone retired in 1983, Richardson was elected to the IASIA Presidency, and he was later to write a short history of IASIA (Richardson 1992).

To those who know him, Richardson is a somewhat strange mix of a devout Anglican, a person not altogether comfortable in social situations, and a wag. He is fond of telling how he became aware of plans to establish the Canberra College of Advanced Education (CCAE) and the search for senior people to lead it: he says that, while sitting on a loo in Mauritius, he glanced casually at an available six-week-old copy of the London Economist, where the CCAE founders had advertised a position of Head of School of Administrative Studies (in the book, he simply states that he was on ‘a “watch” in the office on a lazy afternoon’: p.340). Equally casually, he sent off a copy of his CV. He travelled to Canberra for interview in May 1968 — his first visit to Australia — and before he left he had been offered not the position he had read about but the Principalship. Thus began his long connection with Australian tertiary education, and with many other Australian public sector activities as recorded in the book under review.

This is an attractively presented but privately published and rather long book. It is not surprising that it reflects its author in various ways. His strong commitment to education is that of a man of action with an impressive record of institution-building. There is thus much action in the book, and a lot about people Richardson worked with in the various phases of his career. That said, however, the book does much more than simply recount these chapters of a colourful career. Particularly in its extensive treatment of African developments, it is a rich source of materials on the movement to self-government of two of the largest African countries and on the role of public administrators generally in that movement; it also speaks eloquently of the twilight years of the large British Colonial Service, and of the debates that have raged about the sub-field of development administration. This part of the book is likely to prove of considerable interest and value to political and administrative historians.

It skates much more lightly over the years Richardson spent in Australia. In part this is because, as he points out, he covered the first decade of that period in the volume he wrote to commemorate CCAE’s 10th anniversary (Richardson 1979). In Canberra as elsewhere he demonstrated his skill as an institution-builder, and the book does not do full justice to the Australian achievement. And, even in this abbreviated part, the abiding concern with the localisation of the public services of developing countries moving to self-government and/or independence is apparent in the attention given to the connections Richardson established between CCAE and administrative training institutions in Papua-New Guinea and the South Pacific. In Australia itself, he was happy to build an institution which catered for all levels of education and a wide variety of professionally related disciplines; but, within that general achievement, he devoted particular energy to the establishment of programs (including shorter non-degree programs) for in-service personnel and took satisfaction from the statistic which showed that, over many years, CCAE had a higher proportion of mature-age students than any other Australian tertiary education institution.

His enthusiasm for an ongoing research-supporting trust in partnership with the Institute of Public Administration Australia as the principal professional body for public officials, and his generous donation to facilitate the work of that trust, are further indications of his abiding interest in the processes of public administration and commitment to their improvement.
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Johannes Bjelke-Petersen: The Lords Premier

Joh Bjelke-Petersen was Premier of Queensland for a nearly 19 years and four months, a record that will probably never be beaten. The literature on Bjelke-Petersen is a reasonably rich one, hitherto including his own characteristically unapologetic memoir and two biographies, a ‘first draft’ one by journalist Hugh Lunn, originally published in 1977 and several times updated, and a well-illustrated hagiography (albeit containing much primary source material on the family not available elsewhere) by business entrepreneur Derek Townsend. This reviewer recently purchased a near-mint copy of the latter title, signed by both the subject and his formidable but congenial wife, for one dollar.

If the economics of publishing and book distribution have dictated a similar fate for political scientist Rae Wear’s biography of Bjelke-Petersen it would be a travesty. For Dr Wear has produced a well-rounded account of the amazing life and adventures of the man who was unarguably the most widely-known Australian state premier of the 20th century. Although she commenced her study with an unfavourable perception of his ‘authoritarian and undemocratic regime’ (p.xi) from which she did not resile, she has given some space to alternate viewpoints, particularly those related to Bjelke-Petersen’s well attested to helpful courtesy, which even extended to his biographer.

Wear has organised her assayings from a tremendous amount of material into 12 chapters. The life of Bjelke-Petersen is treated chronologically in the first five chapters, which include a chapter on the pervasive influence of his family and an in-depth study of the religious influences permeating his later career, when ‘as a ‘good’ Christian he expected to be trusted and thus had no need for constitutional checks and balances’ (p.29). Bjelke-Petersen’s education, both formal (which ended at 14) and informal (in which as an amateur debater the 26 year old farmer was, surprisingly ‘complimented for his flow of beautiful English’) (p.41) are covered in the same chapter which also discusses his years as a hardscrabble farmer who became wealthy by dint of bone-grinding labour. Another chapter covers his early years as that lowly form of life, an Opposition backbencher, a phase in his career which came to a close with the fall of the Gair Labor government in 1957. The author has made particularly good use of Hansard to illustrate the nascent politician’s adherences to many of the stances that he would later take as premier. The other seven chapters all feature major themes in Bjelke-Petersen’s life.

Two chapters are devoted to his relationship with the National Party organisation and its most notable personality, Sir Robert Sparkes. The second of these chapters looks at the deterioration of his symbiotic relationship with Sparkes and how it precipitated his downfall. The other chapters look in turn at Bjelke-Petersen and his Cabinet, the coalition, parliament and federalism, public administration and, finally, the media and the people.

The chapter on public administration is excellent, and shows how, as Bjelke-Petersen’s confidence grew ‘his wishes became government policy’ (p.186). Bjelke-Petersen’s Public Service was ‘characterised by centralised decision-making, lack of planning, lack of inquiry and analysis into problems, and inadequate information with which confidently to make recommendations’ (p.190). The minutiae of economic management bored him and the head of the Treasury recalled that Bjelke-Petersen had an attention span of two and a half minutes on economic issues (p.194) but he had a good capacity to delegate in these matters. The chapter on administration also clearly demonstrates Bjelke-Petersen’s abandonment of public service conventions in order to ‘get things done.’ His close relationship with the corruption-ridden police force and its sycophantic com-missioner,
Terry Lewis, with whom he famously discussed non-police matters such as the 1985 electoral redistribution is also discussed in some detail. Wear concludes that he ‘intervened in public policy on behalf of his own interests and at the behest of his friends, brushing off allegations of corruption in the police force and turning on the critics who dared to question his leadership’ (p.206).

Wear has made judicious use of all the standard sources and extensive use of interviews and personal communication with surviving participants, including the former premier himself. The book is extensively referenced, with all informants except for one identified (note 26, p.83) and in this case, because of a change in my own professional circumstances, I am now able to admit to being the anonymous source cited. Beyond a typographical error or two, I found no factual errors in the book except for a misdated caption on a photo of an anti-Springbok demonstration that took place in 1971, not 1973 — this error may well be typographical also.

Earlier biographers of Bjelke-Petersen could not say so, but it is unlikely that there will be much to add to this biography in subsequent editions, given the great age of its subject and the fact that he has now been out of the political arena for nearly 15 years. Possibly some new perceptions will emerge from the release, under the 30 year rule, of new Cabinet documents over time. But despite the archival embargo on minutes of Cabinet discussions Wear has interviewed enough surviving participants and made use of enough reported Cabinet leaks to put together a reasonably comprehensive picture of life in the Bjelke-Petersen Cabinet, which he dominated so much that decisions made in his absence with which he disagreed were frequently rescinded on his return (p.136). Even if there needs to be minor tinkerings with the text in the years between now and 2018, when the last of the Bjelke-Petersen Cabinet documents become publicly available, Dr Wear has written a biography which is likely to be the definitive one.

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Policy (2nd edn)

Part of the Open University Press series on ‘Concepts in the Social Sciences’, this is the second edition of a clearly written and succinct text on policy as a concept. As Colebatch notes: ‘The concept of policy is central in our understanding of the way we are governed’ (p7). It is also a term that is used fairly loosely with a range of meanings from specific pronouncements of government intent through ministerial statements, to kindergartens’ rules regarding sick children, and as a description of routine practice — described by Colebatch as the ‘small-scale’ application of the term.

This book does not attempt to pin the word to a specific definition but sets out to describe what it means in its many forms. It touches briefly on what Colebatch describes as ‘adjectival policy’, specific policy areas such as ‘health policy’ or “environmental policy”, but it is predominantly a book about policy per se. The chapter titles reflect this focus presenting a series of questions about policy from the opening ‘Why Worry About It?’ to the final ‘Where Do We Go From Here?’. In between, the book explores who makes policy, why, and how and also draws attention to the differences between normative approaches to the policy concept and what policy ‘looks like on the ground’. It provides a clear introduction to the debates among theorists about the policy process as well as discussing the reality of the policymaking environment. Each chapter concludes with a useful list of suggested further readings.

‘Policy’ provides a valuable introduction to a wide literature and summarises the key arguments in plain English that should appeal to students, policy makers and the interested public alike. In spite of its accessibility, the book does not back away from the complexity of the concepts presented. The chapter entitled ‘What Do They Say About It’ is new in this edition. It provides a ‘Rough guide to the policy literature’ and is a particularly useful overview of different theoretical approaches to the subject. It is organised around a number of key terms including policy sciences, public policy, public choice and radical critiques and provides a brief introduction to these approaches to thinking about policy and the literature in these areas.
For readers unfamiliar with the day-to-day operations of government, the chapter which describes policy as an activity (‘How Do You Do It’) provides a good description of the different activities that are encapsulated under the catch-all title of ‘policy work’. As Colebatch notes, this is a somewhat neglected area of academic writing on the policy process and yet to students with an eye to a career in public policy or activists seeking to influence the policy process it would be of considerable interest.

One minor criticism of the book is that there is some repetition in the examples used and in one case a paragraph is repeated almost in its entirety within three pages. Overall however the presentation is clear and this will undoubtedly be a popular text as well as attracting a broader audience interested in the policy process.

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The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability.
Culture’s Essential Role in Public Planning

In this short booklet, Hawkes’ goal is to lay bare what culture means and to demonstrate that it deserves to be given a top place in policy development, alongside the other three pillars of sustainability, economic development, the environment and social justice. ‘The main conclusion of this paper’, argues Hawke, ‘is that … (public policy) would be more effective if cultural vitality were to be included as one of the basic requirements, main conceptual tenets and overriding evaluation streams’ (p2).

All this has much to recommend it. But culture is a slippery beast partly because it is broad as well as vague, rendering it difficult to use in a policy setting. Hawke begins with a couple of definitions of culture, which are very broad indeed:

[Culture is] the social production and transmission of identities, meanings, knowledge, beliefs, values, aspirations, memories, purposes and understandings. [It is] …The way of life of a particular set of humans: customs, faiths, and conventions; codes of manners, dress, cuisine, language, arts, science, technology, religion, and rituals; norms and regulations of behaviour, traditions and institutions (p.3).

Hawkes’ project is focused on public administration, and with making sure that the people’s values — whatever they are — prevail. Planners (defined broadly) are urged to create ‘the conditions in which th(e) community can autonomously express those values itself’ (p.23). He offers a number of suggestions as to how this is to be best achieved, from town planning, and sport to education. Top of the list is arts policy and practice:

[T]he first engagement we should have is with arts practice … Why? Because the arts are the creative imagination at work [and play] … [It is important to] offer all citizens and their offspring the opportunity to actively participate in arts practice — to make their own culture. Creativity, engagement, cohesiveness, wellbeing and respect for difference will be inevitable outcomes (p.24).

Hawkes’ argument is an enticing one, which is certainly worthy of consideration. But he struggles to develop it convincingly. Surprisingly little is said about the relationship between political power, economic interests and culture, leaving important theoretical issues unexplored. This perhaps explains Hawkes tendency to slide into bouts of sweeping generalisation:

… there are many values informing our society that run counter to those based simply on the production of goods — that instead focus on good (p12).

Clearly, culture, as I have defined it has the starring role within this paradigm — one may be sick, hungry, poor, and rained upon but still have wellbeing if one still feels an active part of an organism that is bigger than oneself (p13).

Community building, cohesion, capacity and social capital … are all built on an awareness that humans are social beings and are happiest (and, in general, most productive) when we operate interdependently (p18).

Sometimes Hawkes’ generalisations collapse into the uncomfortable territory of tautology:
Diverse values should not be respected just because we are tolerant folk, but because we must have a pool of diverse perspectives in order to survive … (p.14).

Community cohesion is utterly dependent upon the ability of individuals within a community to understand, respect and trust one another (p.18).

For government to remain in touch with, and responsive to, the cultures of the communities it serves, it needs to identify the prime ‘culture-making’ social entities and to develop a relationship with these that is consciously ‘cultural’ (p.28).

At other times Hawkes descends into a leftist populism:

- We need the confidence to facilitate diversity, to believe that, at the end of the day, good will triumph, even though we, at the time, may not recognize it (p.22).

There is an increasing awareness that more and more people are feeling disengaged from ‘their’ society. It may be a long bow to make comparisons between Solidarity, the Berlin Wall, Marcos and Suharto and conditions in Australia, but there is certainly no doubt that there is a generally perceived lack of connectivity between our political elites and their constituencies (p.16).

Reflective of a broader problem with the book, he furnishes no evidence to support this view, although there is a lot of evidence around that he could have used.

This in turn captures nicely the trap into which Hawkes ultimately falls. In failing to ground his argument in empirical research, Hawkes seems more interested in a policy apparatus that does not so much enable the people to express their values, but one which delivers the values which he holds high.

In the end, then, his manuscript is less a fully developed argument than a loose set of promising ideas in need of a convincing theoretical and empirical justification.

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The Prince’s New Clothes: Why do Australians Dislike Their Politicians?

In the wonderful fable The Emperor’s New Suit, Hans Christian Andersen tells the story of a monarch obsessed by fine clothes. The emperor’s vanity makes him vulnerable to two unscrupulous tailors. They offer him a suit made of cloth so magic it is invisible to any man unfit for office.

The emperor is keen to see himself resplendent in a new suit, but privately anxious whether the outfit might say something about his own fitness for office.

Of course the swindlers have no magic cloth, but know neither the emperor nor his officials will risk revealing doubts about their own competence. So the emperor and his retinue lie to each other, pretending to admire the flowing colours, fine silk and gold thread of the new suit. When the tailors pretend to fit the emperor with his garments, the courtiers coo and compliment before the monarch sets out on a grand parade, arrayed under a beautiful canopy, to show his subjects his superb outfit.

The people prove just as insecure as their monarch, admiring the suit rather than admitting their own ignorance. Eventually a little boy in the crowd whispers to his father ‘but he has nothing on at all’. Only then does the crowd understand they, and the emperor, have been fooled. But the officials fail to notice, and walk ‘with still greater dignity, as if they carried the train which did not exist’.

For a book about politicians and voters, it is a tantalising story, and used to good effect by academics David Burchell and Andrew Leigh. Who is really afraid of the truth, they ask: voters who don’t trust politicians, or leaders who won’t tell the electorate unpalatable truths about the limits to government power?

This book evaluates the contemporary mood of cynicism toward governments. Why, ask a collection of politicians, policy-makers and scholars, do we distrust our elected representatives? And has the ethics of political life really deteriorated, or are public expectations just unreasonable?

For contributors such as pollster Murray Goot, the steady decline in respect for political
leaders is clear. His extensive data shows two-thirds of Australians believe politicians look after themselves rather than attend to the national good.

Yet the same evidence suggests voters are no more disillusioned with politics than a generation ago. We are, though, somewhat less informed — readership of newspapers and even television viewing during election campaigns have declined over the past 15 years. Yet curiously, support for compulsory voting remains strong.

Why is trust in politicians declining? As Andrew Leigh argues, there is no single explanation, and therefore no ‘silver bullet’ to make everything better. Trust between individuals everywhere has fallen. Not just politicians, but almost every profession and institution is coping with reduced public confidence. Some blame a consistently negative media, others a decline in personal interaction as people retreat to cabled houses and block out the world.

Despite evidence that declining trust is not linked to anything politicians do but to broader social trends, a good deal of the book is taken up with discussion of political ethics. ‘What’s so responsible about responsible government?’ asks John Uhr, while fellow contributors evaluate ethics and public opinion, ethics around the cabinet table, ethics and public office. Former ALP National Secretary Bob Hogg explores ethical dilemmas on the campaign trail, in party pre-selection processes and in the rise of money politics given the escalating cost of political advertising.

All contributors see opportunities for improvement, from better-crafted codes of conduct to more transparent accounting systems. But in truth governments have adopted these in recent years, and more besides. Leaders such as Peter Beattie in Queensland have experimented with community cabinets and integrity commissioners, and shown themselves willing to speak in plain words about confronting issues. Yet overall public trust still in the political process still points south. If politicians are not the cause, they are unlikely to be the solution.

Written in 1837, Hans Christian Andersen’s elegant story suggests something basic about human nature; in our eagerness for approval, we are easily fooled. In the tale — as in politics — the unscrupulous play on insecurity. It takes considerable courage (or simple naivety) to question what everyone takes to be true.

So what is the truth Burchell and Leigh wish to proclaim? In the end, the editors hedge their bets. Most Australians believe politicians are self-serving and use this as an excuse for not paying attention to public life. Are they wrong to think so? The editors might suspect so, but close their book not with a call to action but with a survey of political advice from Machiavelli and other notable counsellors to princes. This is a shame, because the book has lots of provocative ideas and some excellent writing. In the end, however, it again allows us all to walk with greater dignity, following that smartly-dressed man up front.

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Note
* This review first appeared in the Courier-Mail 11/5/2002)

Serving the Nation: 100 Years of Public Service
Public Service and Merit Protection Commission, Canberra 2001 (ISBN 0642 543 399 (pb))

If a week is along time in politics than Serving the Nation 100 Years Of Public Service is almost a doddle. The work gives an account of the development of the Australian Public Service, from its inception but does so in a light and undemanding way. In doing so the book achieves the objectives set for it by the Public Service Commissioner Helen Williams, where she describes the work as being neither a narrative nor institutional history of the public service. Instead it provides an ‘[u]nderstanding of the journey the Service has taken’.

The high quality production and liberal use of illustrations that borders on an ostentatious departmental newsletter means the volume has more the look and feel of a coffee table book than an earnest academic tome. However, the production values reflect the audience at which it is being aimed. Serving the Nation has no pretensions of being an erudite effort. Textbooks on public administration are widespread and are becoming more common, while histories
of public administration that would appeal to those with a limited or passing interest in civil service, are rare. That is this book’s appeal. It doesn’t seek to encroach on a crowded market, where it would not be able to compete, but instead serves to give an initial historical retelling of aspects or major incidents in the past century of federal administration.

The book details the history of the APS through the spotlight of the seven major chapters: foundations, changing expectations, people, accountability, the leadership group, employment relationship and change and continuity, each of which takes an uncomplicated usually chronological look at the events pertaining to each theme.

However, sometimes the headings are misleading such as the heading chapter on people. If one were looking for an account of the characters and colourful identities of the public service, then you would be disappointed. Instead it tells of recruitment, promotion, occupations and composition of the service. However, there is a limited characterisation throughout the book through the extensive use of pen portraits of the venerable public servants of times past: Nugget Coombs, Robert Garran and Duncan McLachlan to name a few. However, these portraits read as brief hagiographies and reinforce some of the myths of service. They often resemble a romanticised retelling of history that many have received while sitting at the desk of a reflective Branch Head.

Much of the book is written in this style, particularly in the chapter on leadership where there is an almost quixotic chronicling of the public lives and roles of the mandarinate. The work continues to build the bureaucratic pantheon in its description of the postwar period. While reinforcing the popular perception of the ‘Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs’, with the mandarins (although I can’t recall this term being expressly used) entrenching themselves in their dominant position over the elected government, this chapter does little to explain what influence these seven had on policy development and public service evolution during this period. However, the remaining sections do, give a more fulsome account.

If the reader is expecting a pointed insight into historical or even more recent events, then they will be sadly disappointed. While there is little new information, there is, in many instances, liberal use of direct quotations from sometimes ancient primary and secondary material. Given the authorship of more than 200 contributors and the supervisory role played by many former and serving senior public servants, and writing style that has a lot in common with a departmental minute, one might almost have expected copies of these source documents to be appended as attachments.

There is one omnipresent subject in this book, it is the relationship between ministers and the public service. Coverage of this topic is scattered regularly through each of the chapters but in a form that is both sanitised and more a recounting of a Howard government minister’s ideal view of the relationship between the two, than of controversial or difficult events. This view is compounded by the foreword of Minister David Kemp in which he reflects on the ‘professionalism, the culture of the service and the high ethical tone and the values of an apolitical, impartial Public Service’. While there is little, if any direct expansion in the body of the work directly commenting on professionalism, culture or the high ethical tone, the book does reinforce the notion of an apolitical and impartial service. The terms ‘apolitical’ and to a lesser degree ‘impartiality’ are largely used in the context and language of the Public Service Act 1999.

There is little acknowledgement of the large body of work on the issue of neutrality. This leads to a confusion of terms. The concept of neutrality is one that has evolved over more than a century and is a basic tenet of the Westminster system, yet the work always links it to the term ‘apolitical’. Neutrality can be breached in many ways, only one of which is party political involvement. Nowhere is the confusion of terms highlighted more than in the recounting in the body of the text and in the panel inset of the party political involvement of Dr John Burton in the late 1940s and 1950s. The Burton episode is not placed in the context of the concept of a ‘neutral’ public service but appears to be simply a reminder that the political views of the departmental head should not publicly differ from their minister. The Burton issue is contrasted with the mention, briefly only in passing, of the ‘removal’ in 1999 of the Secretary of the Department of Defence, Paul Barratt. In his decision in the Barratt case, Justice Hely
Review Articles and Book Reviews

Review: Trade, Environment, and the Millennium

Gary P Sampson and W Bradnee Chambers eds

The book is about one of the more controversial issues in the current international affairs — trade and environment — within the context of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The book is not only about the difficulties in reconciling the priority between promoting trade liberalisation and protecting the environment but also about the legitimacy of the international trading system under the auspice of the WTO. Has trade liberalisation accelerated the unsustainable consumption and production pattern and have trade rules prevented national governments from protecting the environment by using trade measures? Or has the international trading system led to higher standards of living and levels of employment and greater prosperity so that more resources could be directed by national governments to effective environmental policies? As all the chapters in the book demonstrate, there is no clear answer to the questions. This seemingly irresolvable controversy is partly due to the different positions taken by trade supporters and environmentalists and partly because of the complexity of the issues. It concerns the ever expanding multilateral trade rules (subsidies in fishery, eco-labeling, sanitary and phytosanitary standards) as well as the dispute settlement procedures built in the WTO (chapter 5). The division between the developed and developing countries (chapters 1 and 3) over the issue and demands from NGOs for their participation in trade negotiation on environmental issues (chapter 4) only make the complicated issues more complex. Another major obstacle in reconciling the two issues is the existence of the two bodies of multilateral rules that are found in multilateral environmental agreements and others in the multilateral trading system overseen by the WTO (chapter 11).

The legitimacy of the WTO currently is in question primarily because of these ‘trade and …’ issues — trade and environment, trade and human right, trade and labour rights, trade and … etc. Historically, multilateral trade negotiations are held behind closed doors and trade officials tend to wield greater political clout than do environmentalists and environmental agencies. Continuing the practice would risk the legitimacy of the WTO. Opening up the negotiations might allow cross-sector discussions and the identification of possible trade-offs but might be at the cost of reaching no agreements at all. WTO emphasises that it is only competent to deal with trade. That is, in environmental issues its only task is to study questions that arise when environmental policies have a significant impact on trade. The WTO is not an environmental agency. Its members do not want it to intervene in national or international environmental policies or to set environmental standards. Other agencies that specialise in environmental issues are better qualified to undertake those tasks. International environmental conferences also emphasise that an open, equitable and non-discriminatory multilateral trading system has a key contribution to make to national and international efforts to better protect and conserve environmental resources and promote sustainable development. So long as this world-view remains, it is difficult for the controversy to be resolved within the context of WTO.

As an edited volume, the book provides an overview of several key issues concerning trade
and environment. Rules regulating trade dispute settlement (chapter 4), subsidies (chapter 5), technical barriers, intellectual property rights (chapter 8–11) all have their impact on environmental issues. Analysing them as technical and apolitical issues, as is too often done here, only simplifies a much more complicated real world. Furthermore, as in most edited books, it suffers from the lack of a coherent and comprehensive discussion on the issue, especially on what the WTO as an international organisation can realistically do on the issue. In reality, no actions can be taken to address the issue of balancing trade liberalisation and environmental protection unless some real initiatives are taken by the WTO itself. But, so long as the ‘old-trade’ hands dominate the organisation, environmental issues would be on the backburner. The greater issue may be how to build a network for global governance by pursuing cooperation among different multilateral organisations. After all, even the contributors to the book cannot avoid mentioning the relevance of other international organisations in dealing with trade and environmental issues.

In general, this edited book is worth the attention of both trade supporters and environmentalists who need to keep their mind open to the other side of the battle. It is also a good piece of supplementary reading for university students who need to know that the world is not always black or white, or trade or environment.

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**Political Economy in Federal States: Selected Essays of Stanley L Winer**
(Edward Elgar 2002, 352pp ISBN 1840 647 817 (hb))

Theories of federal political economy are notoriously contextual. Try as we might to generalise about what makes a political system ‘federal’, and to extrapolate comparative lessons from common constitutional lineages and appearances, examination of the economic and financial structure of different federations tends to bring edifices of similarity crashing down. Local government finance is a case in point.

Into this minefield comes the latest issue in Wallace Oates’ series on fiscal federalism and state-local finance. Much as Oates himself, from Maryland, has helped repopularise the contributions of structural financial devolution to policy flexibility and responsiveness, Stanley L Winer’s *Political Economy in Federal States* presents a body of work which despite its sweeping title, is technical rather than comparative. Fortunately, therefore, it showcases specific techniques for measuring the economic effects of political systems and vice versa, principally using Winer’s native Canada, rather than trying to generalise.

Most of this work is not new. The publisher’s enticement that ‘some’ of this ‘rich collection’ was even unpublished, relates to only two of the 12 papers; the rest were published by Winer and coauthors between 1977 and 2000. That said, they present a diversity of problems and approaches over time, undoubtedly of particular value for teaching. Most papers present exercises reasonably intelligible even to economically illiterate students, ranging from the political economy of intergovernmental transfers to fiscally-induced interprovincial migration. Economists should judge the four papers on macroeconomics for themselves. The final paper ‘endogenous policy in a computational general equilibrium framework’ will chiefly excite econometricians interested in public choice theory, and how the political dimensions of policy instrument determination (in this case, electoral effects of tax decisions) can be married into applied general equilibrium modelling. The broader import of this remains its potential for extension to ‘the economic consequences of alternative constitutions, an aspect of constitutional design which is often neglected’ (p.306) — indeed, not least in Australia.

Most of the lessons for federalism are incidental to the fact that Winer’s research environment happened to be a federation. It is thanks to this empirical focus that the results escape the overgeneralisation problem so conspicuous in Australian political theory. Australia itself appears only once, alongside Canada in a paper ‘on the reassignment of fiscal powers in a federal state’, which posits the value of a better understanding of when and how nations actually restructure revenue-raising and spending responsibilities, as opposed to voluminous literature on what these should be. Here Winer concludes that ‘fiscal centralisation is so pronounced in Australia that one is tempted to ask if an initial constitutional division of powers [1901] imposes any constraints at all on the
actual effective assignment of policy instru-
m ents’ (p.96) — a telling comment on the
character of Australian fiscal as opposed to
theoretical federalism. Significantly, if unfortu-
nately, this was also before the GST.

In case any Australians wanted to seize on
this to bleat anew about vertical fiscal imbalance,
one of Winer’s older papers presents a useful
model for measuring the impact of federal grants
on Canadian provincial fiscal decisions. ‘Some
evidence on the effect of the separation of
spending and taxing decisions’ substantially put
to bed the fear that VFI had lasting major
negative implications for fiscal responsibility.
Particularly interesting is Winer’s revised
conclusion that this is partly because the average
voter is not as stupid as some constitutional
theorists seem to believe: ‘the provincial voter,
who is also the federal voter, sees through the
circular route taken by his or her taxes, and thus
sees no price-effect as a result of the increased
separation of spending by the provinces and
taxing by the feds’ (p.xi). In other words,
taxpayers do not appear to become less vigilant
about how governments spend their money just
because it is not necessarily being spent by the
same one who collected it. Similar analysis
would have to be adapted for Australia’s more
complex equalisation system, but if not already
undertaken, perhaps should be.

Is this kind of research being undertaken in
Australia? Not obviously, it seems so far from
Oates’ series – with the exception of Brian
Dolley’s Political Economy of Local Govern-
ment (with Joe Wallis 2001). Why do we
generally seem happy to preserve such a wide
separation between political theory, and the
empirical offerings political economy might
bring to understanding our own political sys-
tems? And at what cost? That itself may be too
empirical a question, but if we want to develop
the tools to answer it, Winer’s kit is at least a
place to start.

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