

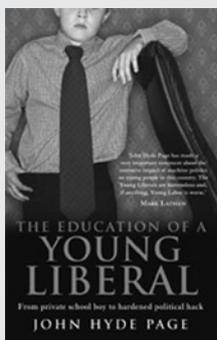
Life begins at 40; politics begins well before

Tim Hickman reviews

Please Just F off, It's Our Turn Now*
by Ryan Heath, (Pluto, 2006, 228 pages)

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The Education of a Young Liberal
by John Hyde Page (MUP, 2006, 328 pages)



Please Just F* Off, It's Our Turn Now, and Education of a Young Liberal say considerably more about their authors than they do about anything else, despite the fact that one is about matters of policy, the other about pure politics. Ryan Heath, author of *Please Just F* Off, It's Our Turn Now* has been a student politician, an ALP staffer, a 'refugee advocate', and now lives in London where he is a bureaucrat. Heath has a tendency to rely on personal example for his arguments, which is largely unconvincing: 'I know in my bones that Australia is no longer the lucky country it thinks it is'.

John Hyde Page, author of *Education of a Young Liberal* graduated from the highly regarded Cranbrook School in Sydney and, fuelled with an overwhelming desire to become President of the NSW Young Liberals, and then move into politics, which he claims as his main motivation throughout most of the book, rose through the ranks of the 'Moderate' faction of the NSW Liberal Party to become a notorious branch-stacker and all round political hack.

Heath's basic argument is that the Baby Boomer generation has harmed Australia, and that the cost is being borne by those born after 1970. Heath premises the need for Boomers to

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fuck off on the predictable basis that Australia is greatly inferior to the rest of the world. Because our cities 'have none of the chaos and atmosphere of Asian cities, are not over-the-top like the US, lack the sheer depth of historic Europe', he opines, we are in danger of falling behind the rest of the world, and intelligent 20-somethings are leaving as quickly as they can.

According to Heath, his generation defies conventional labelling, such as 'Baby Boomer' or 'Generation X'. However, he goes on to explain that this generation could be considered the 'responsible' generation, because of connotations of inclusiveness and diversity. Heath goes on to cite the example of illegal drug use—his belief that young people these days take drugs in a more responsible manner than say, baby boomers did, is presented as an example for such responsibility.

Whether taking drugs at all is responsible is a question that seems to have slipped his mind.

Another chapter of the book, 'I ♥ Capitalism, it's not 1968', is a refreshing piece of realism that many of his former colleagues in the National Union of Students would do well to read. To the rest of the population, it is no great revelation. Heath also profiles charitable initiatives in which young people are involved, which are certainly worthwhile and encouraging. Two trends he identifies are those of increasing media diversity, and the increasing tendency for individuals to spend only short periods of time in any one job. It is disappointing, however, that for all the time and effort spent in identifying trends, Heath is unable, or unwilling, to nominate policies that should logically follow, such as deregulating the media and labour markets.

Heath's best piece of analysis is that of the housing market, especially how it is increasingly difficult for young people to purchase homes, largely as a result of existing property owners, baby boomers, lobbying against development, and in favour of tax breaks for property ownership such as negative gearing. '[W]hen you watch these people ... sign petitions against freeways and then petitions against a proposed block of flats down the road that, if built, would mean the freeways for commuters wouldn't be necessary, it's hard not to be cynical'. Unfortunately,

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Heath neglects to mention the vital issue in driving up house prices, that is, the government-created shortfall in land available for development. In Sydney, for example, land as a percentage of the overall cost of a home has risen from 33 per cent to 78 per cent. A reduction in the land rationing caused by planning, which would let the market, not the government, determine the best use of land would have a far greater effect on housing affordability than abolishing negative gearing.

'Australian under-achievement' is explored in considerable detail. This includes unoriginal arguments against HECS fees, arguments about the need for so-called 'Corporate Social Responsibility', the alleged exodus from Australia by young people, the lack of media diversity, and a boring political scene. These arguments vary in depth and quality, the highlights being a sound analysis of the ABC 'domain of the white over-forties', and criticism on the restriction of entry into the media market, such as government controls on radio bandwidth. Heath concludes with some policy ideas to increase young people's engagement in the political process, such as extreme environmental policies, and more money for education.

Heath's work makes for an interesting contrast with John Hyde Page's, *Education of a Young Liberal*. Hyde Page's biographical work provides a fascinating insight into the inner workings of political parties, a topic which has, with the exception of *The Latham Diaries*, been the subject of very little attention in the popular press. Indeed, the front cover of the book features a quotation from Mark Latham about the 'corrosive impact of machine politics on young people in this country'. The book is largely a collection of anecdotes, which vary between humorous and disturbing, while illustrating a culture of factionalism and branch-stacking in the Young Liberals which is of considerable concern.

Hyde Page's introduction to the Young Liberals is fairly innocuous, attending a number of social functions and doing some basic campaigning, be-

fore working his way to near the top of the moderate faction. His mentor was a man named Michael Braddon, whose relationship with Hyde Page is the focus of much of the book. Braddon was a political hack par excellence, blessed with a quick wit and charm, and as Hyde Page puts it 'a rare and dangerous gift of being able to instil psychological and emotional dependence on those around him'. Braddon was also emotionally unstable. Although Braddon and Hyde Page later have a drastic falling out, his influence on Hyde Page is profound.

The battle between the Moderate and Right Wing factions is often amusing, bordering on the absurd. Hyde Page details how two Liberal Clubs would set up stalls at O-Week at University, one with stickers containing slogans such as 'Socialism Sux', or 'Fuck off Lefty Scum', and petitions supporting VSU, while another Liberal stall would have pamphlets from ATSIC, the Australian Republican Movement, and the Australian Conservation Foundation, as well as a petition opposing VSU. From this it is difficult to reach a conclusion—other than that the Right are somewhat more attuned to the mainstream of the Liberal Party and indeed of Australia as a whole.

Factionalism proves to be destructive for both the Liberal Party and the individuals within it. Many talented and interested people either quit the Party or were stacked out of their positions. Hyde Page himself has feelings of doubt early on, 'I don't think I will ever forget the ashen look on Lachlan Bennett's face when the people he had welcomed into his branch appeared out of the blue and took it all away from him'. Hyde Page goes into some detail on the lifestyle that factional hacks live, many resorting to alcohol and almost cut off from mainstream society, for the sole purpose of having power within the Liberal Party.

The book is a great insight into the workings of the Liberal Party in NSW. However, it is doubtful that Hyde Page can be divorced from his standing as a factional player. Pseudonyms are used for certain members of the Moderate faction, but never for those from the Right Wing. Hyde Page's claimed justification for leaving the Young Liberals was that he was disillusioned with factionalism. However, it also came at the time when he had finally realised that his ambition to become President of the NSW Young Liberals was unable to be fulfilled. Often, criticisms of the Right-Wing seem to be petulant and take the factional line, as opposed to being a serious critique of individuals or policies espoused.

The lack of life experience of both writers manifests itself in their work. Ryan Heath has provided an interesting policy agenda, but is severely limited in his analysis. Although at times he can provide the reader with thought-provoking and common sense argument, too often he has a tendency to back up argument with little more than personal experience, and occasionally, simple prejudice towards baby boomers. Hyde Page writes from a biographical perspective, but unquestionably many of his actions in the book were reckless and damaging to himself and others around him. Undoubtedly, he was immature and to some extent vulnerable to manipulation, although this cannot excuse his conduct. Irrespective of what one thinks of his personal conduct, Hyde Page tells a fascinating story, which anyone interested in Australian politics should find as interesting as it is disturbing.

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