



Consensus forged: everybody now thinks the cane toad was a mistake

for very low wages or long hours in the slump of the 1890s—the time of a real ‘race to the bottom’ in pay and conditions. In the new century, minimum wages were common or at least demanded in many countries.

In Australia employers accepted a wage fixing floor as both a trade-off for protection and a way of stopping tougher competitors from undercutting prices by wage paring. The Federal arbitration system only gradually became dominant and was little criticised. The court reduced the basic wage in the slump of the 1930s, in line with deflation, and the thin margin it retained above prices was often applauded for providing needed purchasing power.

In inflationary periods such as the early 1950s the ‘spiral’ effect of court-fixed wages was tolerated because it was offset by the maintenance of living standards, meaning purchasing power.

The system only came to be widely condemned in the 1970s, mainly because of the accretion of complexity, rigidity and clubbiness over three-quarters of a century and the changing nature of a high-tech, globalising workplace.

Commonwealth Government assistance to literature and cinema went back well before Patrick White’s Nobel Prize in 1972 and the Whitlam Government. Government assistance has its

downside, but the amounts are meagre in the scheme of things and unlikely to make anybody rich. Political correctness is so entrenched in the arts scene that state aid makes only a marginal difference, if a regrettable one.

In theory, the more people there are working in the arts, the more the chance of creative friction leading to top quality results. There would be fewer Australian films and novels without assistance, and the assisted lot have not always been as dull as they are now—look at the 1970s.

It is a nice theory that state aid to non-government schools, starting with the 1963 Federal grants for science blocks, should have all come from state governments, in order to keep the administration tidier. But it was never going to happen. State Governments were so pressed to provide their own education in the 20 years after World War II, with the baby and migration booms, that they simply could not have afforded much more, whereas the Commonwealth could and enjoyed the political luxury.

Had Labor not split in 1955, there was a chance that Arthur Calwell could have become Prime Minister, the last of the big spenders and prone to evaluating foreign affairs issues by their potential for domestic and internal ALP politics. At least it might have made a

subsequent Whitlam government tread more carefully. On the other hand, Alan Martin, Menzies’ biographer, says that these were Menzies’ most productive years, when his governments were freer of political pressure than before the split. And it is a mistake to see the split based on anti-communist ideology. The political differences of the parliamentary wings were a minor part of a schism that was based mainly on hard and nasty inter-weaving feuds among the unions of the organisational wing.

Perhaps the more accurate assessment of town planning is that most people want it, but want it to be different. I certainly welcome legislation that allows controlled rather than open-slasher redevelopment and high front fences in my neighbourhood.

The White Australia Policy could also be more usefully criticised for the rigidity and excesses with which it was applied than its existence. A new, small society is entitled to build up its population nucleus and economy. Until World War II this was done mostly by subsidising British immigrants at times when they and their skills could be fairly readily absorbed.

Those who perceive White Australia as original sin should be more precise about alternatives. Should non-white immigrants have been subsidised or otherwise encouraged, as the British were? Should, for example, sugar cane growers have been allowed to recruit them as permanent immigrants at low pay, in a society without a minimum wage? Rightly or wrongly, people usually took it for granted until at least the 1950s that non-white equalled low pay.

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