

From the Editor

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SOME wit once remarked that the Soviet Union was the only country with an unpredictable past. Since the Soviet Union was the culmination of history (doesn't this all seem remarkably bizarre now?), the whole path of history had to, of course, support whatever the Soviet leadership was doing at the time, and whoever was Soviet leader. Since both these things changed from time to time, history—as officially presented (and unofficial presentations were forbidden, forcibly)—had to change as well.

Australia is certainly no stranger to struggles over history. Much of what passes for intellectual debate in this country is most emphatically concerned with how to view the past, what stories it tells, what values it supports.

As a free society, in place of Soviet-style centrally directed history, we have various scholarly publications which are widely regarded as authoritative. The recently published (1998) *Oxford Companion to Australian History*, edited by Graeme Davison, John Hirst and Stuart McIntyre—two Professors and a Reader in History—is such a volume.

Now, such Companions are somewhat at the mercy of their contributors, their knowledge and judgement. The quality of contributions—particularly about contentious issues—can tell one much about the general quality of intellectual life.

Three entries at least suggest that there are real problems with that quality in Australia. The entry on *philanthropy* by Shurlee Swain reeks of 'progressive' suspicion of action not blessed by being undertaken by the state or 'approved' institutions such as the labour movement, and contains a strong dose of rant about gender roles. Having recently had the pleasure of speaking to several senior figures in non-government organizations, the large role that women play in this sector was very obvious. Since Swain implies that male domination of philanthropy in the nineteenth century was a negative thing, what does the



reversal imply about the twentieth? (In the 'heads I win, tails you lose' rhetoric of such feminism, the marginalization of philanthropy, no doubt.)

The entry on *poverty* by Tom Stannage sanctifies the standard 'progressive' leaching of the concept of genuine deprivation out of the concept of poverty. The concluding statement 'Poverty, in relative if not absolute terms, was probably worse than at any time since the Depression; politically, its alleviation has never been such a low priority' is just bizarre given the massive increase in average incomes since the Depression—the standard pension, for example, has quadrupled in real value. That government expenditure per Australian on health, education and welfare has increased fivefold in real terms in the last 40 years—leading to taxes being at record peacetime levels as a share of GDP—surely suggests a certain 'social priority'.

But the triumph of ideology over accuracy and judgement is nicely displayed in John Carroll's entry on the *Institute of Public Affairs*. His concluding sentence is: 'In the years 1991–96, under the directorship of John Hyde, the IPA became so single-minded and extreme in its economic libertarianism that it steadily lost both influence and financial support'.

Where does one begin to unravel this wish-fulfilment masquerading as history? 1992 saw the election of the Kennett Government, whose adoption of the broad outlines of Project Victoria, as

developed by the IPA and the Tasman Institute, arguably represented the greatest policy success of think-tanks in Australian history.

In the years 1992 to 1993, the IPA reached its maximum influence as measured by income, staff, publications, media interviews or any other measure of output or influence. The IPA was known, by Dr Carroll and his confrères, to be leading the economic reform movement which was transforming the Australian political scene. A transformation Dr Carroll certainly did not approve of. Given that Dr Carroll was an avid critic of the IPA at this time, and the finances of the IPA are available through Australian Securities and Investments Commission records, Dr Carroll has no excuse for not knowing this.

Financial support for think-tanks is best described as counter-cyclical. The worse the situation, the greater the concern, the easier it is to raise money. The late 1980s were a good time to be raising funds, particularly in the Victoria of Cain and Kirner. As Victoria and Australia's position has improved—significantly due to the adoption of market-oriented economic reforms—the fundraising climate has become harder. Nevertheless, the IPA continues to operate at a level of activity and influence considerably greater than it did prior to the early 1980s.

John Carroll is a strong opponent of market reforms. His entry in the *Oxford Companion to Australian History* on the IPA ends as (inaccurate) polemic masquerading as history. It is the belief that history is the plaything of one's ideological preferences which marks the mentality of the apparatchik. Unfortunately, judging from some of the entries in the *Oxford Companion*, ideological self-indulgence is the order of the day in much of Australian academia. No wonder that knowledge of history is in decline among Australian students—if they are to be fed fairy stories, then modern fantasy writers and game-designers do it so much better.

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