PART I

Contemporary Theories of Australian Politics

Introduction to Part I

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Sometimes the study of Australian **politics** is described as being atheoretical and unreflective about the approaches that underpin analysis (Crozier 2001, p. 17). In this book, we deliberately foreground some of the major theoretical traditions and approaches that exist in and underlie Australian political inquiry. We do this for two reasons: first, we believe that political theory has a rich history and presence in Australia (Stokes, cited in Crozier 2001); and second, by focusing on these approaches we can better understand the diversity and distinctness of Australian political science.

Elsewhere, Gerry Stoker and David Marsh (2010, p. 3) have surveyed the field to show how each different approach to political inquiry 'combines a set of attitudes, understandings and practices that define a certain way of doing political science'. We have included four of their seven approaches here to foreground the variety of mainstream and critical political science found in Australian scholarship: **institutionalism**, **behaviouralism**, **critical theories** such as **feminism** and **Marxism**, and **discourse** approaches. These approaches can be heuristic devices for students of political science to see and understand how different approaches will often lead to different research topics and questions. For example, taking an institutional approach will produce a focus on political structures, while adopting behaviouralism will concentrate on the **agency** of political actors.

In Chapter 2 on institutionalism, Allan McConnell argues that an institutional approach to politics suggests that institutions matter more than any other factor in explaining political decisions and their consequences. The chapter examines the 'old' institutional approach, with its emphasis on explaining **public policy** decision-making with reference to formal rules, regulations and **constitutional** frameworks. It shows that this was once *the* default position of Australian political analysis. McConnell then examines the emergence of 'new' institutionalism from the mid-1980s onwards, with its emphasis on institutional **power**, values and culture. He looks at how this theoretical approach is used to explain the limited power of leaders and **governments**, long-term issues of policy continuity and the squeezing out of some good ideas from Australian politics, as well as the perpetuation of some bad ones. In Chapter 3, Rodney Smith explains why behaviouralism has not dominated political science in Australia in the same way that it has in North America. Nevertheless, behaviouralism's focus on individual political behaviour, its quest for general models of politics and its emphasis on rigorous standards of evidence have been essential to an Australian understanding of electoral behaviour and political attitudes. Smith explains that the relative lack of behavioural research in Australia could be attributed to two reasons: first, Australian political scientists generally have not been socialised into the approach through their doctoral research training; and second, the evidence necessary for testing behavioural questions related to political elites and policy-making is often missing or extremely difficult to collect in Australia.

As Ian Cook points out in Chapter 4, a critical theory approach centres on inequality and distribution of power, and challenges other approaches by taking an explicitly **normative** stance towards the creation of social and political change. This chapter examines the contribution of Marxist and feminist ideas within Australian political

science, charting their successes in the 1980s in changing understandings of **class**- and **gender**-based power relationships, and then noting their fall from favour. A discourse approach, underpinned by an anti-foundationalist ontological position, fundamentally questions the other understandings in this part of the book. It directs us to focus on how meaning is constructed discursively in politics, rather than to look for causal processes and generalisable theories (Furlong and Marsh 2010). Chapter 5 by Simon Tormey surveys the field of discourse theory and analysis, including the important influence of French theorist Michel Foucault, and the emergence of the radical democratic ideas of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau. In Australian political science, these ideas on discourse and meaning have been applied particularly to understanding Indigenous Australians and their politics.

Two broad theoretical traditions are also included in Part I: theories of **democracy** and international theories. Democracy is often assumed to be based on the idea of 'rule by the people', but Adrian Little shows in Chapter 1 that there is diversity as well as difficulty involved in translating theoretical understandings of democracy into institutionalised practices. The chapter surveys the evolution of democratic thought from direct democracy, through **republican** ideas, to the ongoing dominance of theories of **liberal** democracy, despite challenges from pluralist and elite theories. Contemporary liberal democratic thought increasingly is questioned by the emergence of **deliberative** democracy. Little examines multiculturalism in Australia to demonstrate the tensions and evolution of democratic ideas.

The inclusion of Chapter 6, by Bob Howard and Diarmuid Maguire, in our collection might be seen as unusual, as many scholars see the sub-disciplines of Australian politics and **international relations** as having separate pathways of development (Bellamy and Davies 2009). Against this, Howard and Maguire highlight the rich tradition of international relations theory and scholarship in Australia, and its relevance when it comes to helping us to both look inward to Australian domestic politics, as well as at the role of Australia in the world. The chapter surveys the cases of Australian security, the environment and international economic engagement from the four main international relations theoretical perspectives: liberalism, **realism**, **constructivism** and neo-Marxism. Its aim is to emphasise how, when governments, groups and individuals think about Australia's relations with the rest of the world, they necessarily engage with different ideas about how the world works.

1 Democratic theories

Adrian Little

Australia is identified commonly as a 'democracy'. Such an identification can be questioned on two levels. One concerns whether or not Australia actually measures up to democratic standards. That level is discussed at length in later parts of this book. The other, dealt with in detail in this chapter, concerns the issue of what exactly constitutes a democracy. The chapter identifies seven different approaches to the 'rule by the people': direct participatory democracy, republican democracy, representative democracy, elite democracy, pluralist democracy, deliberative democracy and liberal democracy. Some of these approaches – for example, liberal and representative democracy – are consistent with each other. Others – such as direct democracy and elite democracy – cannot be reconciled. Whichever of these versions of democracy we adopt, this chapter suggests the difficulty of applying them to Australia without considering the impact of international factors such as globalisation and migration.

This chapter will introduce readers to the most fundamental way of examining Australian **politics**: as a **democracy**. Competing theories of democracy will be explored, with the emphasis on how well democratic theories explain how Australian politics works (rather than whether or not Australia ought to be a democracy). Thus, rather than advocating a **normative** model of how Australian democracy should be, the chapter concentrates on the relationship between democratic theory and democratic practice in the contemporary Australian context. It progresses from a basic definition of democracy as *rule by the people* based on the values of political equality (Birch 2007). However, it is important to recognise that this definition can be interpreted in a multiplicity of ways and institutionalised in a variety of forms. The focus of the chapter is on the ways in which particular values associated with democracy have been expressed in the theorisation of democratic systems and the ways in which this link between values and theoretical systems influences and is challenged by some complex issues in contemporary Australian politics. The underpinning argument is predicated on the difficulty of translating theoretical understandings of democracy into institutionalised practices, under conditions of social and political complexity (Little 2008).

Despite the varieties of democratic theory discussed here, Australia's political system falls squarely within the parameters of models of **liberal** democracy. Liberal democracy is usually understood in an institutional sense: liberal democracies are systems that attempt to combine the democratic principle of political equality with various institutions that embody liberal ideas of freedom. This is a complex balancing act, but it usually involves a combination of institutions that are based on either liberal concerns for freedom – such as the right to vote for a **representative** of our choice – or those that invoke equality – such as the universal franchise and the equal value of the votes cast. These combinations are not uncontroversial, but it is fair to say that liberal democracies usually are understood as systems with specific political institutions such as voting for representative assemblies, free and fair competitive elections, the **separation of powers** and a free press. In practice, these institutions take on many different forms, which highlights the multiple interpretations that can be induced from the principles of democracy (Dryzek and Dunleavy 2009).

Theories of democratic systems

One of the dominant trends in contemporary democratic theory is to examine the institutional architecture that best reflects the idea of rule by the people (Held 2006). This approach narrates a chronological story that moves from the direct democracy of the Athenian city-**state** through various other iterations to contemporary liberal forms of democracy. Along the way, typical themes emerge – such as the pursuit of the common good in **republican** theory, the distinctions between participatory and representative models of democracy, the challenge of pluralism and elitism in the twentieth century, and the emergence of **deliberative democracy** over the last 20 years. Normative theory features strongly in this literature, whereby advocates of specific forms of democracy articulate support for their favoured models on the grounds that they are most adept at encapsulating principles of democracy (Weale 1999). On close inspection, it becomes clear that existing democratic systems rarely embody unadulterated theoretical models, and that most democracies are hybrids forged from a variety of different ideal type conceptions. Polities such as Australia are formed from a variety of political practices that have been derived from aspects of most of the major historical theories of democratic systems.

Direct democracy

The traditional starting point in analysis of attempts to enact democracy is the direct form of democracy that was fundamental to the idea of democracy found in ancient Greece. In that setting, **citizens** actively *ruled* insofar as they made decisions about the issues that affected them. As is often noted, the citizen body in the Greek city-states was strictly limited, with most inhabitants excluded for being women, slaves, non-property owners, and so on (Hyland 1995). The functionality of ancient Greek direct democracy was closely tied to this restricted nature of citizenship, which enabled a gathering of citizens at which significant issues could be discussed and voted upon. Many of those affected by these decisions had no say in them, so the direct democracy of the Greek city-states was direct only if understood in a particular and highly restricted fashion. Nonetheless, the principles that the city-state model embodied have remained resilient in terms of inspiring democratic theory and action. Thus, despite the increased complexity of contemporary societies like Australia and the different scale of complex polities, the values that direct democracy encapsulated continue to inspire political thinking today (McDonald 2006).

Two critical points that have been made about direct democracy concern the issues of scale alluded to above and the assumptions direct democracy makes about the capacity of citizens to govern themselves. The idea of *the rule of people* is predicated on the belief that the people – however defined – are able to understand the issues at play in decision-making processes and, through engaging in democratic procedures, are able to make appropriate decisions. This is a view that has become contentious in democratic theory. In placing the participation of the people at the heart of institutional architecture, direct democracy generates questions about what is supposed to motivate individual participants. The traditional assumption was that citizens would be thinking about the good of the city-state in their democratic engagement, but later theories have been much less sanguine about the motivations of political actors. Indeed, many contemporary commentators have questioned both the rather benevolent view of

human nature that such a model invokes and assumptions about the ability of ordinary citizens to comprehend a wide range of complex issues, so that the best decisions would always be taken. For this reason, an alternative republican reading of democracy became more influential from the twelfth century. Republicanism remains prominent today (Pettit 1997).

Republican democracy

While republicanism can generate direct forms of democratic institutions, the important contribution it has made to contemporary democratic theory is its concern that democracy is not just an institutional entity but needs to be underpinned by particular values. Thus it is not just the establishment of certain political institutions that defines Australia as a democracy, but also the kinds of social virtues that those institutions encapsulate. The original ethos of republicanism was opposed to arbitrary rule by tyrants and the church, and oriented towards polities in which participants in decision-making took part on the basis of trying to work for the common or civic good.

While direct forms of democracy do not address motivations in any great detail, republican theory suggests that individuals should participate with a view as to what is in the best interests of society as a whole. While participation is central to this perspective, the emphasis lies much more squarely on the values and principles that democratic citizens bring to bear on the decisions they make. Democracy is more than merely an agglomeration of individual preferences; it is oriented towards participants leaving individual views to one side in their engagement in the collective democratic project. This resonates with many popular Australian narratives that focus on values such as *mateship* as reflective of a broader collective project, above and beyond the narrow concerns of the individual (see Chapter 10).

Representative democracy

From the middle of the seventeenth century, a rather different model of democracy began to emerge, which focused more on representation than on participation. This was due to issues of scale in the democracies that were emerging, but also reflected a growing scepticism about self-government and human nature. Where classical theories had assumed certain dispositions of their participating citizens, the new liberal democracies were much more focused on the election of individuals who it was hoped would have the attributes and capacity required for good government. Given the timing of its formation, this model has been deeply influential on Australian forms of democracy.

For the last 200 years, most democratic theory has concerned itself with representative systems, although this focus on indirect forms of government is still criticised by those who advocate more direct or participatory processes, such as the use of **referenda**. The main concerns within representative democratic theory have been with which specific models of representation stay closest to the underpinning principles of democracy. Thus there is a focus on institutions such as voting systems, **parliaments** and **executives**. As important as these debates are, they have led to a shift away from debate about the underlying principles of democracy. Not the least of the concerns here is neglect of the potential tensions between the democratic pursuit of equality and the liberal objective

of freedom. In this vein, some authors contend that contemporary liberal democracies such as Australia are truer to the principles of liberalism than they are to those of democracy (Mouffe 2000).

Pluralism

The major challenges to liberal models of representative democracy emanate from pluralist and elitist accounts. The **pluralist** view, articulated from the 1950s, concentrates on the multiplicity of groups that characterise modern democratic societies, and views democracy as a system whereby **power** rotates between the different groups and parties in society. Pluralists suggest that democracies need to better reflect the diversity that exists within them, and that this requires power to be held by different parties and groups at different times and over different issues. They are against systems that see power concentrated in the hands of the few, or the pre-eminence of one or two political parties (Dryzek and Dunleavy 2009). The more diverse a society is, the more likely it is that these groups and parties will reflect a collection of different minority interests, rather than being able to claim the support of all, or even the majority, of society.

This kind of recognition has been more apparent in recent neo-pluralist theories, which take greater account than earlier pluralists of the ways in which the in-built biases of political systems can favour some groups in a polity and militate against others (Dahl 1989). The great contribution of pluralist ideas to democratic theory has been to demonstrate that it is not sufficient in a diverse society merely to have certain generic forms of institutions such as elections or representative chambers. Instead, the specific nature of these institutions would reveal the extent to which a particular set of democratic institutions could be deemed to be representative of the variety of interests in society. In a complex system such as Australia, with multiple levels of sometimes interlocking and sometimes disjointed forms of government, there are elements of pluralism at work. Different parties are often in government at the state and federal levels. **Independents** and **minor parties** have been able to gain footholds in Australian parliaments. Nonetheless, the political system is still dominated by the major Labor and **Coalition** parties (see Chapters 12 and 15). Thus, while there may be elements of pluralism at work in Australian political life, it is much more difficult to argue that Australia has a pluralist democratic *system*.

Elite theory

The other major criticism of **liberal** democracy to emerge in the twentieth century was **elitism**, which raised questions about the capacity of the people to govern, and the dangers of the 'tyranny of the majority' (Dryzek and Dunleavy 2009). The most important thing in a polity was that the *best* decision makers were in place to enable the successful functioning of society. Elitism has been regarded as a **conservative** philosophy by many commentators, who see it as a recipe for the maintenance of power by established elites. While that is clearly a danger of some elite theories, it is also the case that this perspective can sit reasonably comfortably with the operation of contemporary liberal democracies such as Australia. For example, most elite theorists recognise the conflicting nature of elite groups, and therefore are comfortable with using representative elections to ascertain which of these groups has the most support at a given point of time to enable it to govern. If, at a different time, an alternative elite

group takes power, then the process is compatible with democratic elitism. Arguably, modern liberal democratic systems work on something like this basis, especially as parties become more *professional* and less oriented towards the demands of a mass membership (see Chapter 15). Moreover, the trend towards the professionalisation of political parties has coincided with increased awareness of the power of established social elites in Australia (from media moguls to peak industry bodies) to influence the political agenda in ways that seem far removed from the capacities of everyday democratic citizens.

Elitism is questionable as a theory of democracy, due to the way in which it constructs a theory of democracy that is so openly sceptical of the capacity of the people to govern. While that scepticism may be well founded, it raises questions about the extent to which elitism can actually be considered a theory of *democracy*, or whether it is in fact a theory of government or the state. Participatory critics of elitism have been quick to point to the limited legitimacy that is acquired through sporadic elections and the need for mechanisms to hold political elites to account. Concerns have also been raised about the capacity of elites to communicate effectively with citizens. It is clear that elitism correlates with aspects of contemporary liberal democratic **governance** in societies such as Australia, but it is far more questionable whether this elitism is in fact an aspect of democracy rather than one of institutional governance (see Chapter 2). In other words, there is a strong analytical case to be made for separating notions of democracy and governance when it comes to understanding the ways in which contemporary liberal democratic regimes operate (Bang and Esmark 2007).

Democratic values and contemporary debates in Australia

A number of significant values are elided in modern liberal democratic politics. For the purposes of understanding democratic theory and its implications for contemporary Australia, it is important to highlight the ways in which this elision takes place, as well as the tensions between the different values that underpin liberal democracy. Moreover, in identifying the primacy of political equality as a democratic value, it is important to understand how that concept relates to the other values that supposedly are embodied in democratic politics, such as political legitimacy and the accountable exercise of political authority. These questions about the role of equality cannot be divorced from debates about social and political power. Issues of power are deeply implicated in the greatest questions about the composition of Australian democracy.

Formal versus informal equality

Contemporary liberal democracies abound with references to the political equality of citizens, the need to protect individual freedoms and the place of **rights** in ensuring that these liberties are experienced on an equal basis. While these **discourses** can be woven together with the rule of law into a reasonably coherent narrative about the values of contemporary liberal democracy, below the surface, the concepts of equality, liberty and rights often generate discord and political conflict. One reason for this is that the principle of equality in this equation emanates from democratic theory, whereas the focus on liberty and rights emerges from different trajectories of

liberal theory. Beyond this tension between the principles of equality and freedom, a further schism exists between *formal* notions of equality that are enshrined in liberal democratic institutions such as elections, and the inequalities that operate in more subtle ways – for example, **class** inequalities and various forms of discrimination such as sexism, racism and homophobia. These continuing forms of inequality undermine formal understandings that are part and parcel of liberal democratic institutions. There is a widely held suspicion that the elision of liberal and democratic aspirations and values masks a much greater concentration on the liberal part of the equation, and much less on the democratic pursuit of equality (see Chapter 4).

In Australia, there is an ingrained emphasis on equality both in formal political institutions and in broader social and cultural practices. The notion of equality is not just a political artefact that gets formal recognition at election time. Instead, it is evident in popular discourses such as the idea of the 'fair go' and the suspicion of privilege and elitism in social and political practice (see Chapters 7 and 10). The practice of contemporary democracy in Australia is similar to that in other liberal democracies insofar as criticisms are often raised that politics has become more distant from the people. Politics has become more professionalised and elitist, and in so doing has generated increased levels of disenchantment and alienation for many people (Hay 2007). In this respect, the situation in Australia may be perceived to be particularly acute, given the sceptical cultural context that Australia provides for political institutions.

Globalisation and democracy

One issue is that representative democracy works at one step removed from the populace. While this may have been sustainable through the first half of the twentieth century, the emergence of a much more connected, globalised world and less acceptance of authority and hierarchy have placed new pressures on representative forms of democracy. In the twenty-first century, with the high levels of connectivity and an abundance of information that now exist, new pressures have emerged that challenge democratic polities to reflect more closely the diversity of views and interests in society (Crozier 2008; see also Chapter 9). Australian democracy is challenged by processes of **globalisation**, as important decision-making processes seem to be even further removed from a national democratic basis than was the case 20 or 30 years ago. That said, those same processes have placed greater emphasis on international organisations in which Australia is well placed to exercise influence. This is not least because of the important geopolitical role that Australia plays in the Asia-Pacific region. At the same time, this powerful aspect of contemporary Australia seems far removed from questions of democracy considered in terms of the rule of the people. There is a tension between processes that give rise to additional influence and power on the international stage, and a perceived gap is growing between the governing elite and a disenchanted public (see Chapters 6 and 32).

A deliberative approach?

Two perspectives in democratic theory, both linked to the idea of deliberative democracy, have attempted to deal with this emerging scenario. The first is associated with the work of Jürgen Habermas, who makes the case for a formal proceduralism to govern interaction in political institutions. The corollary of this proceduralism is that civil society