Australian Liberals and the Moral Middle Class

From Alfred Deakin to John Howard

When the Liberal Party of Australia was formed in 1945, it drew on political traditions which had been central to Australian politics since Federation. This book, by award-winning author and leading Australian political scientist, Judith Brett, is an exciting new political and social history of that tradition. It offers a rich and complex analysis of the shifting relationship between the experiences of the middle class and the Australian Liberal Party and its predecessors. It begins with Alfred Deakin facing the organised working class in parliament and ends with John Howard, electorally triumphant but alienated from key sections of middle class opinion. It challenges many settled assumptions about the Liberals, and about Australia's twentieth-century political history, and is destined to become the definitive account of the Liberal Party and its political forebears.

Judith Brett is the author of the highly acclaimed Robert Menzies' Forgotten People, winner of the Arthur Phillips award for Australian Studies, the Douglas Stewart award for non-fiction and the Ernest Scott prize. Formerly the editor of Meanjin, she has been teaching politics at La Trobe University since 1989.
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JUDITH BRETT
In memory of my grandparents, Harry and Matilda Brett
and Harry and Elsie Williams, none of whom ever voted
Labor, and for their grandchildren, most of whom do.
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Preface

Midway through the twentieth century the Liberal Party published a little booklet called ‘We Believe’. Comprising seventeen short paragraphs it was a creed for Liberal Party believers. Item 3 read ‘We believe in the Individual. We stand positively for the free man, his initiative, individuality, and acceptance of responsibility’. In 1954 the party was less than a decade old, but its catechism of beliefs looked back to the formation of explicitly non-labour parties in the first decade of the century, and beyond to the nineteenth-century British liberalism the settlers brought with them to the new land of opportunity beneath the southern skies. It also looked forward, to the uncertain postwar future, confident that, whatever lay ahead, the party’s fundamental beliefs would be sufficient guide.

The Liberal Party of Australia was formed in 1945, and although this marked a new beginning, a re-organisation after the low point of the 1943 federal election, it was also the continuation of a political tradition which has been central to Australian politics since Federation. This book is about that tradition. It begins with Alfred Deakin in the first decades of the century, and it concludes with John Winston Howard at the century’s end. It is not a detailed history of the various party organisations, their periodic collapses and reformations; nor is it a history of these parties’ fluctuating electoral success; nor of the various governments they have provided, though it will touch on such matters. Rather it is a history of the tradition of political thinking carried by these parties, and it takes as its primary material the words of those who subscribed to that tradition: the speeches of the party leaders, party policy statements and statements of philosophy, and material produced at elections to persuade voters to support the party. It seeks to understand the symbolic structure of that tradition: how the various beliefs and values hang together; how the contradictions among them are dealt with; the capacity of the tradition to respond to the challenges thrown up by other political traditions and ways of thinking; and the shifting relationship between the core values and beliefs and the lived experience and self-understandings of its supporters.

Statements such as ‘We believe in the Individual’ can be found right through the century, presented as enduring commitments, truths which
never change, solid foundations on which to build a program of political action. But while the words may very well be the same, much in their meaning has changed. What was understood by the term ‘individual’ in 1910 is not the same as is understood at the century’s end, after five decades of peace and postwar affluence and the rise of the identity-based social movements. A commitment to the individual has never been a sufficient basis for a political philosophy; also needed are ways of binding those individuals together into a political community. In ‘We believe’ the commitment to the individual came third, after expressions of belief in ‘the Crown as the enduring embodiment of our national unity’ and ‘Australia, her courage, her capacity, her future, and her national sovereignty’. Today the relationship between the individual, the state and the social whole is thought about quite differently: the commitment to the Crown’s capacity to embody national unity has not endured; statements about Australia’s courage and capacities are challenged by the knowledge of the racism of Australia’s history; postwar immigration has created a diverse society with fewer shared cultural norms; globalisation is changing the possibilities of national sovereignty.

Political conflict is in part a conflict over definitions, over how particular events, situations, and institutions are represented and the larger frameworks of meaning in which these are located. This struggle over meaning goes on at all levels of the political process: in the Cabinet and committees of the government, in the meetings and memoranda of the public service, whenever a politician addresses the public, in the media as people put forward differing interpretations and arguments, in the pressure and lobby groups as they decide how best to advance their case, and in the hearts and minds of people as they try to locate themselves and their interests in the ever-shifting political world. Political parties are key protagonists in this struggle over meaning, bringing order out of the chaos of competing issues, values and interests.

This book is about the stories Australia’s Liberal Party, in its various manifestations since 1910, has told about the political world, in particular the stories it has told about itself and about its chief political enemy, the Australian Labor Party (ALP). In Australia’s essentially two-party system, each party’s story always involves a construction of the opposing party, and of why it would be foolish for the Australian people to entrust it with power. There is an interplay of virtue and vice in these constructions: the virtues the parties ascribe to themselves and the vices they see in their opponent. This is a particularly appropriate way to approach the Liberal Party which has always regarded the values it espouses as the basis of its political identity. As Robert Menzies said in his 1949 policy speech:
We believe that politics is a high and real conflict of principles. I explored this high and real conflict of interest in my earlier book, *Robert Menzies’ Forgotten People*. This book is a sequel. It goes back to Deakin, Bruce and Lyons to explore the origins of Menzies’ mid-century construction of the political world, and forward to Fraser and Howard to see what became of it. There are very few books about the Liberal Party, and even fewer ideas. The book the party commissioned for the Centenary of Federation, *Liberalism and the Australian Federation*, while containing some useful essays, fails to present a coherent and plausible account of the party’s historical role. Yet without such an account, our understanding of the past hundred years of Australia’s history is severely diminished. Labor has such histories. This is an attempt to present one for the other side of Australia’s politics, with the century as its frame, in the belief that the deep patterns of politics reveal themselves best over longish stretches of time.

This book has taken a long time to write. The Australian Research Council gave me a generous grant for teaching relief at the very beginning when I needed space to think the project through. I would like to thank those of my colleagues at La Trobe whose unshakable commitments to teaching and research through difficult times have helped me sustain the effort for a long-haul project such as this; also colleagues in the Combined Departments of History at University College Dublin who made me welcome during my two-year stay. Various people read sections or all of the manuscript and I am grateful to them: Boris Schedvin, Stuart Macintyre, Janet McCalman, John Hirst, Bill Schwarz, Graeme Smith and the anonymous reviewers. At key points in my argument I have been helped immeasurably by the detailed research contained in PhD theses. Such research is the foundation on which later scholarship depends. I would also like to thank Humphrey McQueen who lent me his file on the debate in the 1950s on the introduction of hire purchase to Australia, and Susan Lever for her generous hospitality on my many trips to Canberra.