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978-0-521-47732-1 - Governing Prosperity: Social Change and Social Analysis in Australia in the 1950s

Nicholas Brown

Excerpt

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## Introduction

‘It was a demoralising decade for those in the commenting business’, reflected the *Observer* in Sydney at Christmas 1959, ‘not only because all predictions failed but also because the fields of comment changed so quickly that expertise suffered a rapid rate of obsolescence’. There seemed to be little in common between the commentators who had predicted social collapse, national instability and international crisis at the beginning of the 1950s, and the *Observer*’s urbane writers and readers at the decade’s end. For them, a comfortable cynicism prevailed. They moved easily from columns on the stockmarket, industrial relations and foreign policy to theatre, books and the arts. ‘The Gentle Fifties’—those ‘10 years which didn’t shake the world’—were making way for the now-familiar culture of ‘life-style’ and the generationally distinct images of the 1960s. In place of public alarm was a more detached, ironic view of society. The fears of the early 1950s, of invasion in Europe, revolution in Asia, terrorism in Africa and moral and political subversion at home, all couched in the oratory of press, parliament and clergy, seemed increasingly irrelevant as a more professionalised corps of social analysts tapped into the private lives of citizens and consumers. ‘The real scare of the ‘fifties’, the *Observer* ventured, ‘was probably lung cancer, not nuclear weapons’.<sup>1</sup>

This was a convenient reappraisal. For the *Observer*’s editor, Donald Horne, it provided an early formulation for the hope expressed more fully five years later in that symbol of a new age, *The Lucky Country*, and sustained by him well into the 1990s: the aspiration to inject ‘ideas’ into a society in danger of exemplifying ‘a victory of the anti-mind’ without at the same time rejecting its prosperity and materialism.<sup>2</sup> Here was an interpretation which relegated a decade of complexity, frustration and transition to the more manageable categories of inertia, complacency and irrelevance; which marked a break with the ‘authoritarian mateship’ surrounding the proclamation of the welfare state in the 1940s and the increasing anachronism of ‘the Age of Menzies’. Equally, for those on the liberal-left, whose forum, *Nation*, had closely followed the launching of

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the *Observer* in 1958, the end of the fifties signalled a regrouping for reformers routed by the conservative ascendancy after 1949. In their sober, more guarded mode, however, *Nation's* last issue of the fifties declined to share the *Observer's* sense of occasion. 'The opportunity is present', it was declared, for 'idealism' to be rescued from a superficial and increasingly Americanised affluence—but 'when will it be recognised and grasped?'<sup>3</sup> Their time was to be a little longer in coming.

These coinciding interpretations have, to a large extent, gone unchallenged. Even as the 1950s have become fashionable since the end of the 1980s, they retain the traces of this 'obsolescence'. Weekend colour supplements offer the reassurance that those years 'weren't so bad' for those who enjoyed their childhoods and adolescence then. Alternatively, they feature the political 'survivors' of a decade of internecine conflict: old men who 'still remember and shudder or even darkly chuckle at it all'.<sup>4</sup> The conservatism of the fifties is thus accorded some redeeming features, or at least neutralised, courtesy of a lost 'innocence', just as the political conflicts of the decade acquire a kind of tribal fascination. In short, the period is evoked to establish discontinuities rather than to affirm familiarity and continuity.

Clearly, these perspectives are products of their times and serve their purposes. This is true of all periodisations, but the 1950s bear a particular weight as a point of separation between an old and a new Australia. Politically, and symbolically, they begin with the federal election in December 1949 and the inauguration of twenty-three years of Liberal rule. As such, the fifties are customarily associated not just with enduring political conservatism but with a more fundamental break between an Australia of class, hardship, Empire and assertive nationalism, and the cultural diversity, the 'quality of life' issues, the protest movements and the liberations of the 1960s. A ritualistic atmosphere surrounds the ready recall of controversies and personalities from the intervening years—Menzies, Evatt, Santamaria, Petrov, anti-communism and the Labor Party Split—as if they represent a mechanistic, ideologically manipulated, changing of gears between the smoother-running patterns on either side.

A similar situation prevails in recent cultural evocations. Images of the fifties challenge the present not so much as a discrete past but as a more amorphous assemblage of features, slipping either forwards or backwards in time. As Richard White suggests in the book accompanying 'The Australian Dream', a 1993 exhibition on 'design and the home of the 1950s' at the Sydney Powerhouse Museum, 'what is striking about the decade is that, despite the insistence on stability and normality at the time, how strange it all was, in the long run of history, and how fleeting'. If the fifties have become a focus for contemporary nostalgia, then it is a politicised nostalgia in which the journey back is not simply to a familiar

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'home' of 'living rooms, kitchens and backyards', but to a more 'ambivalent' place, bizarre as much as comforting in the contrasts between its kitsch, its 'featurism' and its self-conscious modernity.<sup>5</sup> This recourse to the fifties might even be seen as the perfect emblem of postmodern preoccupations. The prosperity of those years, already carrying its own anxieties about—as Horne relayed—'the H.P., T.V. refrigerator mind', has itself become a commodity, a 'hyperreality' of multiple significances: this is how we once were/how could we ever have been like that?

And all of this is pragmatically underscored by the ways in which the 1950s have become contested ground in both contemporary political rhetoric and in more detailed reappraisals of public policy. The ghost of the fifties, to take an obvious example, haunted the 1993 federal election, both in John Hewson's appropriation of Menzies' 'forgotten people' and the protest that no one who had grown up during the fifties could stand by and watch their birthright denied their children; and in Paul Keating's taunt of those keen to return to 'the seemingly endless doze of the Menzies era'.<sup>6</sup> No matter that the thwarted stoicism of Labor's 'true believers' in the 1940s or the imperial mantle of Menzies travels poorly into the deregulated and increasingly republican 1990s. It is as if, now that the 'luck' of the sixties has finally run out, politics has been drawn back to the relative simplicities, or at least the easy polarities, of the 1950s.

More fundamentally, the 1980s ethos of 'restructuring' in areas from industrial and tariff deregulation to higher education, explicitly portrays the institutional and political patterns set in the 1950s as the mistakes from which Australians must recover. In taking post-war prosperity for granted, the argument runs, a course towards economic and cultural atrophy was set. Behind these political taunts and policy legitimations there is that same evocation of the fifties: a formative decade, but one conveniently extracted from history as a lesson to be learnt rather than explained.

My aim in this book is to make some contribution to such an explanation. I offer a critical engagement with these pervasive interpretations of the 1950s, with the dismissal of the decade as obsolescent and with the identification of a post-war rupture between the reformers and the reactionaries, between an old Australia and the new. I question the neatness of this ideological break from the perspective of longer-term cultural transitions, and reassess that apparent cultural 'ambivalence' by relating it to specific issues of institutional role and political debate. Overall, this book redresses the tendency of both the political and cultural interpretations to identify the 1950s as an interlude of fleeting preoccupations in which Cold War ideologues ruled and the people were duped. Instead, I hope to reclaim something of the experience of the 1950s from those

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well-rehearsed but rather tired historical categories: suburbia, the Long Economic Boom and so on; and to emphasise issues of longer-term continuity and adjustment. In place of the 1950s as nostalgia or lost opportunity, I return to those themes of complexity, frustration and transition which once seemed inconvenient, but now appear crucial to understanding how Australia has come to be where and what it is.

The argument of this book is, briefly, as follows. At the beginning of the 1950s, prosperity and all it represented, not just economic expansion but a shift in political influence, social values and personal behaviour, certainly challenged prevailing patterns in social analysis. A decade of depression in the 1930s followed by a decade of 'total war' and reconstruction in the 1940s had entrenched a series of assumptions among a diverse grouping, including politicians, academics, advisers, bureaucrats, professionals, public intellectuals and commentators—assumptions relating to the character of society and their role as its guardians and critics. Their experiences predisposed them to comprehend and address social issues in terms of managing the needs of a population enduring internal instability and external threat. From this perspective, they were uncomfortable with the changes they associated with post-war affluence: with its materialism and the increasing fragmentation and mobility of society. They were even more unsure about the resources available to deal with those changes: the institutions, the cultural predispositions, even the moral character of the people. Given their concerns and, more importantly, the established character of the institutions with which these commentators were associated, they did not simply retire once better times arrived. If they did not advance 'ideas' in Horne's sense of prefiguring the future, and if the latent 'opportunities' discerned by *Nation* eluded them, they nevertheless maintained a close engagement with the present. Partly distrusting those better times, partly adjusting to them, they profoundly influenced the ways in which post-war prosperity was to be governed.

This transition in commentary from managing a nation to governing prosperity is at the centre of my interpretation. In place of a sense of expertise 'failing' to keep pace with the changing character of the post-war world, this formulation is adopted to draw attention instead to the extent to which social analysis adapted to the realignments of the 1950s. In doing so, this analysis became an integral part of those changes and at the same time made them intelligible. In emphasising elements of continuity, in tracing the patterns of institutional and cultural integration in social analysis, and in highlighting a partly conceptual and partly tactical adjustment to post-war society among commentators, this book seeks to offer a more subtle and, in many ways, a more relevant perspective on the 1950s than that presiding over existing accounts. In short, it brings

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to the study of social commentary some of the subtlety that has entered into recent studies of welfare policy, labour relations and foreign policy: studies which indicate that the image of the 'true believers' of Curtin and Chifley's Labor government being swept from power in 1949 by a wave of electoral reaction reduces to the impact of external factors the more pragmatic and internal processes of political alignment in the post-war period.<sup>7</sup>

Underpinning the reformism attributed to the 'true believers' of the 1940s was a concern that the scale of post-war social, political, economic and international change could ever be managed as once it had been, through concepts such as class, race, social hygiene and hierarchy, public order and duty. In the 1950s this concern was transposed into, rather than superseded by, the practices of governing the new spaces of post-war prosperity—the more private spaces of citizenship, consumption, the local community, the intimacy of relationships and the individual personality. It is simplistic to explain this transition in terms of an all-encompassing post-war conservatism, a changing of the ideological guard or a stultifying anxiety. For the conservatism which was, undeniably, at the centre of political culture in the 1950s, was less the armoury deployed in an ideological capture or an inevitable product of circumstance.<sup>8</sup> It was instead much more positional, the product of many adaptable and contingent practices carried over from the national developmentalism of the 1920s, the economic discipline of the 1930s and the social mobilisation of the forties. And that post-war anxiety itself could prove remarkably innovative: after all, those who worry, even those who say 'no', shape their societies and draw upon its culture as much as those who seek to be the children of their time. These post-war realignments, and the new spaces of private anxiety they defined, can even be seen as the prerequisites for the various formulations of the 'personal-is-political' ethic which emerged in the 1960s and seemed at the time to leave behind the repressions of the past.

I was born in 1961: the fifties have come to interest me neither as one of the many exercises in autobiographical rehabilitation and the vindication of Cold War trenchancy that have appeared over recent years, nor, on the other hand, as that 'hyperreality' which appeals to those either a little more removed or critically extricating themselves from the shadow of that decade. The 1950s, as I have come to them, are associated instead with the values and attitudes of parents, both born in the 1920s, who found their first security after World War II; they are part of the restless apprenticeships and departures of my teachers; part of the childhoods of older siblings, colleagues and friends, who came into the 1960s more secure (and less sophisticated, in the true sense) than I went into the seventies. So placed between the baby-boomers and 'Generation X',

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I am rather sceptical of sixties liberationism yet still a little too attracted to causes and principles, and caught between wanting to tell the story and to problematise the past. One personal motivation for the research that informs this book has been to try to understand that perhaps inevitably elusive and closed period which immediately precedes one's birth: to understand the aspirations and the sentiments, the boundaries and their transgressions among which I grew up but were not really my own. In seeking this understanding, my approach has been to explore the ways in which the fifties were comprehended at the time by those who had, or assumed, or courted, some responsibility for the directions in which society was heading, and who sought points of consolidation amid that change.

It may be that this approach leaves aside the trauma and the conflict of those 'years of unleavened bread', and resists too much the attractions of 'the 1950s: how Australia became a modern society, and everyone got a house and car'.<sup>9</sup> Yet for someone of my generation, neither the battle-lines revisited nor the suburbs reclaimed fully accounts for the active choices that were made in shaping a complex inheritance.

Neither a political history of government nor a social history of prosperity, this book is instead a study of the intermediary field where prosperity, and all it represented, was constituted as a phenomenon to be governed. And 'government' here is not meant to define instrumentalist or unilateral acts of state but is used instead as the term applied in many fields, following Michel Foucault, to describe a 'contact point' between the regimes and practices of domination, coercion and subjectification in their everyday operation rather than in any privileged moment of policy, and the regimes and practices which shape individual conduct and subjectivity.<sup>10</sup> This is a mouthful: the point will hopefully become clearer in application. To some extent what follows is a history of ideas: a charting of the ways in which a range of concepts in Australian social analysis adapted to a period of significant transition. As such, it is also partly an institutional and intellectual history, for those concepts required structures and advocates to support them and credit them as 'expertise': to give them the formality, the methods, the claims to objectivity and the rhetoric of engagement and persuasion that defines social analysis as distinct from (or in relation to) the more closed determinations of policy on the one hand and diffuse 'opinion' on the other. Yet this is also a cultural history, which does not seek to trace these concepts back to their origins so much as to assess the ways in which they held and conveyed their meanings in social exchange. The institutions and the individuals that appear in these pages are not necessarily identified in terms of their inherent attributes or functions, for it was not always in these fixed roles that they inhabited this intermediary field. More often, they



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serve to identify the contexts in which the things said, thought or done acquired cultural salience in a diversity of contexts—from parliament to pamphlet, from activism to architecture, from commentary on international affairs to the analysis of personality.

It will be helpful to say a little more about the interpretive framework adopted here at the same time as introducing the content and the range of this book. Without claiming an all-encompassing or determinist character for this framework, it is offered here as a schema around which discussion is organised, and which might serve to prompt further debate. Avoiding another rehearsal of the familiar controversies and personalities, this book concentrates on a range of issues which, in the ways they were defined and debated, reveal much about the underlying assumptions and the experience of the 1950s.

To a remarkable extent, Australian social analysis of the inter-war years addressed society as a potential, evolving unity: as a population to be managed. This alignment fostered an assumption that society could be shaped from above by the ministrations of agencies, primarily the state. These interventions would moderate conflicts between constituent parts and seek a consensus to be expressed in ‘settled policies’, such as the exclusion of would-be immigrants, for example, or industrial protection and arbitration. An evolutionary process was depicted, leading to a national, even eugenic homogeneity: the emergence of ‘a new nation, a new human type’ in a society that still thought of itself, with decreasing justification, as ‘the social laboratory of the world’.<sup>11</sup> While an identification with concepts of the state might not run explicitly through all exhortations to realise ‘the idea of the nation’, much commentary presupposed such an engine to guide that potential, accord it objectivity, assert it internationally, and to determine the legitimacy of popular claims and movements.

Nineteenth-century ‘new liberalism’ had already proposed, according to the *Argus* of 1909, that ‘man can attain his supreme good only as a citizen of a state’.<sup>12</sup> But World War I and the scale of inter-war state initiatives and regulation largely replaced an ethic of ‘self-realisation’ with one of management from above—a management which was increasingly associated with a centralised level of government. As each chapter will show, specific forms of expertise developed in precisely these managerial terms during the inter-war years, especially in the social sciences within the universities. The intensity and focus of such management might have varied but, as Tim Rowse has argued, it accommodated a broad spectrum of political views and contradictions, and became the dominant cultural pattern.<sup>13</sup> One neat formulation of this perspective was provided in 1925 when the Commonwealth Statistician, C.H. Wickens, canvassing the ways in which statistical

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knowledge of the population encompassed assessments of its 'vitality' and the progress from 'primitive' to 'modern', wrote

this collection of people which makes up the population of Australia is not a mere heap of heterogeneous material shot on a dump in the Western Pacific, but it is rather a more or less delicately organised piece of mechanism which is capable of great things if due attention is paid to appropriate balance of its parts, but which may be thrown seriously out of gear by any dislocation of its regular action.<sup>14</sup>

As this formulation itself implies, inter-war commentary was often concerned with placing this managerial responsibility in a context extending beyond domestic application and encompassing residual imperial themes. If the fifties confronted Australia with a new search for international allegiance, one with profound implications for the ways in which the Cold War was registered here and for an allegedly 'Americanised' domestic political culture, then it is important to see this search as part of a longer-term quest for regional identity and role.

Chapters one and two, dealing with Australian perceptions of Asia and the administration of Papua and New Guinea, explore inter-war social analysis through concepts of modernisation as they were developed in relation to hierarchies of national maturity and paternalism in 'the Pacific'. Evolutionary precepts in the inter-war years, running parallel with domestic concerns, tended to emphasise the economic development and political stabilisation of the region through the kinds of mechanistic/organic analogies evident in Wickens' remarks. The significance of Asia was then in terms of the charting of these processes, while clear categories of both racial competence and colonial/anthropological intervention were applied in New Guinea to prepare the ground on which that course of advancement might begin. World War II forced a reappraisal of these approaches, both as a result of direct experience in the campaigns against Japan and as a reflection of domestic reappraisals of the conditions of social stability. The challenges of post-war modernity, with its tendency to fragment such evolutionary models into the unstable and competing claims of bureaucratic order and social mobility, had a particular force in an Australia predisposed to managerial perspectives at home and very aware of its proximity to the troubled 'traditional' societies of Asia and its upgraded responsibilities for the 'primitive' peoples of New Guinea. Post-war debates about Australia's 'place' in its region reflected a transition from evolutionary models informed by concepts of economic and racial determinacy to preoccupations with the government of cultural stability. The reflexive nature of assessments of the legitimacy



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of change in both Asia and New Guinea offers a revealing view of the character and techniques of government in post-war Australia. These assessments also had a significant effect on the courses allowed to nationalism in Asia and self-determination in New Guinea.

Yet there was a need for more exacting knowledge of the changing character of society at home. If the mobilisation for total war, the centralisation of political power and the proposals for social reconstruction in the 1940s had promised a more complete association of managerial expertise with the state, then the pressures of the time also politicised that linkage in unanticipated ways. The extent of wartime mobilisation, directly involving 90 per cent of men and 30 per cent of women, in itself required that concepts of the national population as either an emerging type or 'a delicately organised piece of mechanism' be translated into a range of more individualised categories, such as morale, skill and aptitude. In effect, the population became the heterogeneous subjective entities whose commitment, productivity, and aspirations for a 'new order' were integral to winning both the war and the peace.

Something of this realignment can be glimpsed in a report by the Committee on Civilian Morale on the state of the 'public mind' and 'the facts of popular psychology', presented to the Prime Minister in 1942. 'In the last hundred years', the committee advised, 'an accepted mental pattern has arisen among all classes, that we are witnessing a great historical process'. 'The working people' expected 'capitalist collapse'; for 'the middle classes' the pattern was 'a vaguer one of disintegration of their familiar world'. To redress the problem 'this sense of helplessness before the imagined historical process must be counteracted by . . . showing them that historic processes are operating for their fulfilment of their own civilisation and not for its destruction'.<sup>15</sup> The language alone here is significant. A uniform 'historical process' was being replaced by 'historic processes': concepts of national evolution were seen to give way to a multiplicity of specific interventions. And these 'processes' were no longer to be mediated by the distinct identities of class but understood instead as the common entitlements of 'civilisation', with equal meaning for all, individually, as members of society. Its rarefied provenance aside, this report provides only one of many possible illustrations of the ways in which the 1940s distilled a less overtly authoritarian but less dynamic, a less categorical but more normative, and a less elitist but more professionalised culture of social analysis from an inter-war inheritance.

This transition was reinforced as the coming of post-war prosperity, closely identified with private consumption and the empowerment of 'the mass', challenged the assumption of a social whole to be managed. Chapter three deals with the changing ways in which economic commentary conceptualised society in terms of the consumer as a potential

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threat to co-ordinated public policy, charting the processes through which the training from above of management was subsumed within the persuasions and techniques of government. The prosperity of the fifties, much vaunted in retrospect, was defined in rather more equivocal ways at the time, and informed a range of strategies which not only sought to limit the operations of the market but also to circumscribe the economic parameters of citizenship. So much was this so that direct policy regulation was often perceived as a poor technique with which to govern the more subjective claims of an affluent society. Chapter four, then, begins with the renewed decentralisation campaigns of the fifties as exercises in creating structures and relationships in daily life which would better accommodate the needs and demands of post-war society. If programmes to restructure the exterior forms of society had limited success at that time (let alone programmes to alter the patterns of political representation away from centralism), a variant form of the decentralist ethic was more successful in influencing the more interior, informal and intimate spaces of suburban life.

Whether as the consumer, who was at once the testament and the threat to prosperity and stability, or the citizen-in-community of decentralist advocacy, the dominant figure in post-war social analysis was an individual who was to be governed, and to be encouraged in her or his capacity for self-government, not so much through the directives of the state but in terms of the relation between the state and its citizens and the self regulation of their more subjective propensities.<sup>16</sup> In this transition the older acknowledgement of the inherent conflicts within evolutionary development was not only diffused into a sociological consensus, but was also internalised as an issue of personal adjustment and good citizenship.<sup>17</sup>

As is perhaps already clear, the transition from managing a population to governing prosperity can be seen to correspond to a recognisably modernist momentum: as a society acquires greater complexity in its functions and organisational structures, as its economic development generates new opportunities and mobility, and as its bureaucracy seeks to bring order to this expansion, so its concerns steadily centre on the potential for fragmentation and irrationality on the fringes of authority and in the individual citizen. There is an increasing concentration not on the ends of action but on the means. To a large extent, the theme of continuity in social analysis informing this book is based on an insistence that the significance of the 1950s, and even of the conservatism of those years, is as a part of this momentum rather than as a lapse or departure from it. Yet it is also part of this continuity to insist that the trajectory is always mediated by local characteristics. The individualised subject at the centre of much post-war Australian social analysis never quite lost the characteristics of inter-war analysis. In a society in which the state figures as 'one vast public utility',