

PART I

Introduction

CHAPTER 1

Innovation and Tradition

This book uses the challenges posed by environmental issues to explore and test speculations about institutional change, and about the character and effectiveness of the political system as a whole. In other words, it focuses on the particular issue of whether or not political institutions and organisations can contribute to addressing concerns about the deterioration of the environment, and on the broader issue of whether or not these institutions are capable of dealing with all manner of challenges. This is not to underestimate the complexity of matters: in some instances political institutions and organisations may play a constructive role and in others a less than helpful one in dealing with environmental and other concerns. Hence an important consideration in this book will be to identify some of the obstacles that prevent effective policy-making. These obstacles may include the varying levels of power (say, between government, industrial and business interests, labour organisations, the bureaucracy and the legislature), the different interests (for instance, of labour unions and environmental groups) and the distinct logics of action (for example, of the political system, the economy and the legal system).

Another consideration will be to explore the possibilities for overcoming these obstacles and for achieving political consensus. The notion of consensus is closely tied to the notion of dialogue or, in the words of writers like Habermas, to the notion of conversation or rational communication. Habermas (1981a) has focused on what promotes and hinders communication, and has drawn the distinction between instrumental and communicative rationality. Whereas instrumental rationality implies attempts by social actors to measure as precisely as possible the costs to themselves of taking a particular course of action, the concept of communicative rationality emphasises the possibilities for mutual understanding between social actors. Hence an important theme of the book will be to reflect on how political and other institutions and organisations engage in some form of dialogue and how effective policies emerge out of this process. Consensus and dialogue will be treated, along with trust and goodwill, as key principles underlying any attempt to deal effectively with the challenges facing contemporary societies.¹

As regards the arrangement of the book, this chapter describes the main themes and defines terminology, while chapter 2 looks at the rise of the environmental

movement. Chapter 3 provides the framework for the discussion, and ends with an overview of subsequent chapters. In anticipation of the remainder of the book, this part will therefore expand briefly on the concepts of effectiveness and dialogue, on the notions of innovation and tradition and their relevance to the study of institutional change and on the notion of institutions.

The introduction of the concept of effectiveness immediately raises the question: effective from whose point of view? From the point of view of an individual or of a collectivity?² In other words, does the introduction of the concept of effectiveness presuppose a 'subjectivist' or an 'objectivist' analysis of interest? Or, more generally, does the analysis presuppose the existence of a 'social system' with well-developed interests? The notion of a social system is widely used in the social sciences to refer to the connection between the interrelated parts that may constitute a society or the components of a society. In the past this notion has been linked to a theory of society that posits a tendency towards a balance or equilibrium between the interrelated parts. Still, a focus purely on the social system invites ridicule from those who question the notion of an equilibrium between the interrelated parts, particularly in the approach by the sociologist Talcott Parsons which was most influential in the 1950s and 1960s. The main criticism of this approach was that it excluded the notion of conflict from attempts to explain social change. Other objections were: the notion of equilibrium in society was based on conservative beliefs, the theory did not adequately explain what was taking place in society, the arguments were circular and the approach failed to specify the connection between two potentially contradictory claims, namely, the possibility for individuals to influence and bring about decisive changes in society and the many constraints on individual human behaviour. In the words of an English-speaking friend and colleague of mine, despite the introduction by writers like Habermas and Luhmann of the notion of conflict into models of social change based on systems theory and their ability to address some of these objections, 'most English-speakers take out their trusty anti-Talcott Parsons shoulder-mounted ever-ready scatter-bazooka when they sniff "systems"'. My intention is neither to defend Habermas or Luhmann nor to provoke an adversarial slanging match with the proponents of subjectivism or those of objectivism. By effectiveness I mean the capacity of political institutions and organisations to attract support for policies, and then to implement policies over which there is broad consensus.³

The notion of dialogue, or to be more precise, of *constructive dialogue*, is pivotal both to describing the process of the effective implementation of policies and to prescribing a distinct approach. In other words, the notion of constructive dialogue can be used to describe empirical instances and can serve as an ideal type in the manner suggested by Weber (1904). Constructive dialogue refers to a dialogue in which both parties are looking for solutions that will benefit both sides, where parties attempt to develop an empathetic understanding of divergent viewpoints or of divergent goals and where this understanding involves goodwill, the willingness to listen and discretion (Handler 1988).⁴ If a political or bureaucratic system is not open to constructive dialogue and to exploring new ideas, it is more likely than not to develop arrogance or complacency or both. It more easily adopts a bureaucratic mind-set: in other words, it responds to new challenges or ideas with statements like 'we have always done things this way' or 'we've never done it this way' or 'this sets a precedent'.

There is, according to many social scientists and bureaucrats, an inevitable contradiction between the bureaucracy as something that puts into practice the policies legitimately decided upon by a government in a democratic system and as something that exists to perpetuate itself. Weber reflected this pessimistic view. My own approach is less to deny that there are grounds for being pessimistic (hence the focus on the obstacles to effective policy-making) than to draw attention to the terrain that lies outside Weberian pessimism (hence the focus on the possibilities for effective policy-making).

Some will argue that dialogue, even if coupled with trust and goodwill, will not necessarily overcome the many impediments to effective policy-making. This is certainly the case if the dialogue takes place among people who lack competence – the necessary technical skills, for instance, in economic management or in understanding the dangers posed to the environment. There will also be disagreements over definitions of competence or of what constitutes an impediment to effective policy-making. It could even be argued that attempts to introduce new ideas or innovations serve as a distraction from dealing with problems in tried and tested ways. Although some thought will be given to these arguments, the principal focus in this book will be on whether established traditions and institutional practices (though not necessarily some of the principles that underlie them) do or do not represent a formidable barrier to addressing new challenges.

This leads us directly to the notions of innovation and tradition. Political thinkers have acknowledged that the survival or prosperity of a modern society depends both on innovation and on tradition. In his *Autobiography*, John Stuart Mill wrote that: 'No great improvements in the lot of mankind are possible, until a great change takes place in the fundamental constitution of their modes of thought.' By contrast, David Hume recognised that we draw assurance from precedents and past practices, and from beliefs, customs and ways of thinking that have been passed on to us. 'Custom', he wrote, is 'the great guide of human life'.

This book shows how both innovation and tradition can provide a basis for effective political action over the long haul, especially if they are based on principles like trust and goodwill. Tradition can represent principles that have stood the test of time and doctrines that have been passed on from generation to generation. Although some traditions, like an adversarial approach to politics, have stood the test of time, they are not always appropriate for dealing with new challenges (see below). However, in rejecting or questioning certain traditions or doctrines, there is always the danger of throwing out the baby with the bathwater. In other words, in challenging a certain tradition one may inadvertently be rejecting or turning a blind eye to principles that inform us of the motives and, above all, the consequences of human action.

Much the same can be said about innovation. Innovation will be treated as useful and important in so far as it represents an effective response to new challenges. Innovation is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as the introduction of a new thing, the alteration of something established, a new practice or method, and even a (political) revolution. I regard innovation as an idea or practice 'perceived to be new by the relevant individual or group' (Hawkins et al. 1980: 192, based on Robertson 1967). Innovation may be based on strong underlying principles that lead to an improved understanding of the consequences of human

action. On the other hand, it can represent a dogmatic and ineffective response to new challenges.

This brings us to the other central theme of this book, namely how established political institutions and organisations deal with new challenges. What do we mean by institutions and organisations? North (1990) has drawn a clear distinction between them. Institutions represent the 'rules of the game' or 'the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction'; their role is to reduce uncertainty in human interactions. Organisations and their development are influenced by the institutional framework. In the sphere of politics, organisations include political parties, regulatory agencies, and the different houses of parliament. These political organisations can of course influence the institutional framework.

To a large degree, I will adopt this distinction between political organisations and institutions (see also chapter 4).⁵ I will also emphasise the interplay between them: 'Both what organisations come into existence and how they evolve are fundamentally influenced by the institutional framework. In turn they influence how the institutional framework evolves' (North 1990: 5). Established political organisations are usually better placed than new ones both to take advantage of and to influence the institutional framework. This point is crucial when we consider the possibilities for institutional change and for innovation.

All this suggests that tensions are likely to arise when political institutions bearing the imprint of the past try to address some of the problems of the future. Past practices often provide a useful guide to what does and does not work. However, they can also present a serious obstacle to addressing problems in appropriate ways. The experience of the early 1990s suggests three things. First, the pace of change means that old policies and structures may be rendered useless. Second, there are many spheres in which some of the ways of seeing and doing things that have been handed down to us continue to lead us in certain directions despite the need for change. Third, some of the principles that underlie traditional practices may still be helpful in addressing new problems.

Our political system can be shown to be exemplary in both respects, in other words, in its capacity for adaptation and in its stubborn attachment to ways of thinking that prevent us from exploring new ways of seeing and doing things. Among the policies and structures that formed part of the foundations of the Australian polity in the early part of this century, the following have come under severe challenge or become redundant: the White Australia policy, the system of industrial relations (for instance, the shift from the imposition of employment conditions and wages from the centre to a less centralised system of conciliation), and the use of tariffs to protect local industries. In areas like environmental protection, perceptions have changed radically about the possibilities and character of economic development.

Several variables have been used to try to explain these changes. One of the most widely cited is the phenomenon loosely described as 'globalisation' or 'the global system'. This has become synonymous with economic forces that make it difficult, if not impossible, for governments to adopt a purely national focus. Another explanation lies in the proliferation of political movements and interest groups seeking to represent the diverse expectations of citizens. Another explication, often associated with the rise of new political movements, is that there has been a shift in

values and a redefinition of what constitutes prosperity and well-being. For example, the 'postmaterialist' values espoused by many environmentalists (in other words the focus on a sense of belonging, on self-expression and on the quality of life) are perceived as part of a challenge to the ideologies that were associated with the great transformation of the nineteenth century, including the industrial revolution.⁶ This serves to illustrate that 'empirical questions', like the impact of economic development on the environment or on democracy, reflect more than anything the values we place on certain lifestyles or forms of government.

These values change over time. The question then arises whether or not a system of government which once reflected certain values has become absolute or unduly restrictive. Political scientists may then choose to enter upon new situations in a variety of ways (which represent either an innovative or a traditional approach). They can attempt to justify existing institutions. They can describe how they operate in practice. They may even develop new concepts which allow us to view systems of government in different ways and to design improved ways of doing things.

For the practitioners of politics, the tendency is to combine innovation and tradition. Their endeavours in this regard often represent a superficial response to shifts in values or, occasionally, a deliberate attempt to draw on powerful principles that govern human action. Schemes of the 1990s to 'modernise' the Australian polity by promoting the concept of a republic straddle both: the traditional theme is the creation of a distinct national identity which dates back to the late nineteenth century, and the new one is the desire to become serious players both in the international, particularly Asian, economy and in the international political community. It is uncertain whether these efforts will succeed in drawing on principles that will result in beneficial changes for most members of society.

Schemes like those of the republican movement to make the best of both tradition and innovation alert us to the tensions that can arise when political institutions bearing the imprint of the past try to shape the future. Of course, like other political movements, the republican movement has the potential to 'unite' a variety of principles. Similarly, there are possibilities for finding common ground between the expectations of economic development and environmental protection. The question still remains whether or not our political system can free itself of some of the fetters of tradition, which include not only legislation enacted a century ago but ways of thinking that have prevailed for millennia. To illustrate the issue, I will discuss the adversarial approach adopted in political debates and in the social sciences, since this has an impact on policy-making in the area of environmental protection and on many other issues.

Adversarial Politics and Pragmatism

Political debates often reflect the limitations of our thinking about issues. For example, in debates about the welfare state, if you are not a wholehearted supporter of government intervention, you are often labelled an economic rationalist and an unthinking enthusiast for the free market (or a traitor to the cause: see Stretton 1992). Options like the introduction of mechanisms for greater consumer voice in

the delivery of services are thereby excluded from debate (Papadakis and Taylor-Gooby 1987). Similarly, statements in favour of economic development are often read as an attack on the principle of environmental protection. No attempt is made to explicate how economic rationality can complement environmental protection (through the introduction of ownership rights, price mechanisms, tax incentives, tradeable emission rights and enforcement incentives). Much of this is linked to our use of binary codes, in this case 'environment' versus 'development', to process complex information (see the discussion of the work by Luhmann in chapters 4 and 5). Social and political theorists are often served poorly by traditional ways of conceptualising social systems and by traditional forms of logic (notably the use of adversarial logic and of rigid dichotomies and categories) when trying to grasp new situations.

This stirs up several issues about traditional ways of thinking. For instance, although we have inherited from the ancient Greeks approaches and forms of reasoning which have undoubtedly stood the test of time, we have also inherited from them ways of thinking which may be unhelpful in dealing with the complex problems confronting modern societies.⁷ Take the adversarial approach to political debate developed and articulated by Socrates and Plato. Although this approach appears to be useful in controlling the behaviour of those with political power and in finding fault with their actions, it may present serious obstacles to working towards solutions (De Bono 1994).

The adversarial approach is used to great effect by the mass media. It is also a useful device to promote ineffectiveness. The adversarial approach emerges in various guises. It can involve the exchange of personal abuse among parliamentarians. This is usually reported in the evening news, as a headline item. Another tactic is to focus on the mistakes of a political opponent. This is widely accepted as part of a system of checks and balances and internal control. There is some resistance by people to the first tactic, the resort by politicians to personal abuse, though it is worth noting that exposure to that kind of exchange is bound to rub off on viewers (for instance by promoting cynical attitudes not only towards politicians but towards any debates about politics). One could perhaps dismiss this kind of exchange, not take it seriously and regard it as (perverse) entertainment. Still, the other manifestation of adversarialism, the focus on finding fault, is generally accepted as legitimate and worthwhile.

The benefits of this 'critical' approach to debating politics have to be balanced against the costs. The critical or adversarial approach can be useful in alerting us to the pitfalls of adopting a particular policy or line of argument.

- An exclusively adversarial approach can undermine attempts to learn about the real state of affairs because politicians fear that information will be used against them by their opponents. The adversarial system operates, after all, on the clear-cut division between friend and enemy.
- Adversarialism stirs up intolerance by detracting from attempts to understand differences in opinion. Promoting constructive dialogue and resolving differences between apparently conflicting choices become secondary.
- The adversarial approach operates in terms of rigid and absolute dichotomies: if a

particular policy is 'right' then another must be 'wrong'; if you are for the market you must be against the state; if you are for development you must be against environmental protection; and so on. This way of thinking, which often involves claims to represent 'the truth', means that more imaginative and constructive policies are ruled out of political debate. Political issues tend to be presented in terms of exclusive choices.

- Any insights into the policy process, any policy proposals, any imaginative alternatives are valued, in the first instance, less for their contribution to improving social conditions, than for their contribution to the denigration of political rivals.
- Finally, the adversarial approach leads to the mapping of particular standpoints onto actors so that they come to 'embody' these positions.⁸ To defend a position thus becomes the same as defending oneself or a particular side or a particular constituency. This diminishes the likelihood that someone will change their mind as a consequence of argument and debate. To change one's mind becomes a sign of weakness, or even an indication that one lacks principles. All this is not to advocate the outright rejection of adversarialism, but to draw attention to its limitations.

Where adversarialism prevails, attempts at constructive dialogue may be viewed with distrust. After all, there appears to be a discrepancy between acrimonious exchanges on the floor of the House of Representatives and deals which are struck in committee rooms between opponents representing apparently irreconcilable demands. Adversarialism appears thereby to give dialogue and the pragmatic resolution of differences a bad name.⁹ Yet it is worth differentiating between the concepts of adversarialism and pragmatism, even if we are led to identify them with one another in the existing political system.

There is a widespread suspicion of pragmatic behaviour, and it is often contrasted with idealism. The following account of the challenge by Alexander Downer for the leadership of the Liberal Party of Australia in 1994 reflects the understandable concern about pragmatism. John Hewson, the ousted leader, is portrayed as the energetic and hapless 'idealist'.

Politics is not a blood-sport, John Hewson claimed in the middle of his final traumatic week as Liberal leader. He knows better now. It is also a grubby, nasty, unpleasant business. Having watched the political process up close for the best part of 30 years, I find it extraordinary that anyone finds the idea of a political career attractive. . . .

Downer is what Hewson could not be. A politician, pure and simple. As pragmatic as they come, with few illusions, aware that you have to soil your hands to succeed in politics, and ready and willing to do so (Laurie Oakes, in *The Bulletin* 31 May 1994: 17).

Still, there are some drawbacks. Pragmatism and idealism (or action based on principles) appear to be incompatible. The idea that pragmatism (in politics or any other sphere of activity) conflicts with action based on principles is both understandable and difficult to sustain. It is understandable because pragmatism is often regarded as action based on the absence of principles and on the notion that the end justifies the means.

Despite this concern, pragmatism need not necessarily be based on the absence of principles:

There is a justified fear of pragmatism because it seems to seek to operate without principles. This is nonsense because the principles can be just as much part of the pragmatism as are the circumstances. One strong reason for a dislike of pragmatism is the fear that 'the ends may come to justify the means'. In other words, if the end is worthwhile then the means of achieving that end are justified. Since different people and different bodies will have different notions of worthwhile ends, the result would be chaos and barbarity. Interestingly the very reason we reject this notion of the end justifying the means, is a pure example of pragmatism . . . We are concerned with what it 'will lead to' (De Bono 1993: 13–14).

The notion of pragmatism is particularly important in understanding how political institutions and organisations adapt to change. Political institutions are deeply influenced by past practices. Yet they are often struggling to address new issues. There need not be a conflict between principles and pragmatism in meeting new challenges, especially if we understand pragmatism as a concern about the *consequences* of human action. This insight is crucial to understanding the potential for political institutions and organisations to address issues like environmental protection.

CHAPTER 2

Stimulus and Response: The Rise of Environmentalism

Since the nineteenth century, there has been growing disquiet about the consequences of human action on the natural environment. The emergence of mass social movements, political parties and interest groups focusing primarily on environmental issues is a fairly recent phenomenon, and it provides empirical instances of the means by which politics deals with the consequences of human action. It allows us to explore the significance of theories of social change and of adaptation by political institutions. It creates opportunities to assess how our political system works in practice, and whether or not governments can deal effectively with new challenges. It enables us to consider the possibilities for innovation even though we still carry a great deal of baggage handed down to us. It suggests that we can draw on well-established principles in order to try to improve the quality of life. In sum, environmental politics serves as a stimulus for innovative institutional responses.

Environmental Politics

The new movements and political organisations represent one of the most significant sources of political change in advanced industrial societies for the following reasons. They reflect shifts in values and perceptions (like the endorsement of 'quality of life' and 'postmaterialist' values associated with concern about the environment, peace and nuclear disarmament: Inglehart 1990). Support for groups attempting to represent these new concerns rose steadily throughout the advanced, industrialised world in the 1980s, particularly among the young and those with tertiary education (Curtice 1989; Müller-Rommel 1989; Poguntke 1989; Papadakis 1993). The shift in values was accompanied by a loosening of the connection between political conflicts and the old social divisions based on class, and the erosion of support for the major parties based on these divisions (see Dalton 1988).

Paradoxically, the emergence of new movements and political organisations echoes the expectation by a growing number of people that political institutions and organisations, notably those that evolved during the formation of the welfare state in the