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0521822165 - The Cambridge Handbook of the Social Sciences in Australia

Edited by Ian McAllister, Steve Dowrick and Riaz Hassan

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The Cambridge Handbook of the Social Sciences in Australia

The *Cambridge Handbook of the Social Sciences in Australia* is a high-quality reference on significant research in Australian social sciences. The book is divided into three main sections, covering the central areas of the social sciences – economics, political science and sociology. Each section examines the significant research in the field, placing it within the context of broader debates about the nature of the social sciences and the ways in which more recent institutional changes have shaped how they are defined, taught and researched.

Ian McAllister is Director, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University.

Steve Dowrick is ARC Senior Fellow, School of Economics, Australian National University.

Riaz Hassan is Professor of Sociology, Flinders University of South Australia.

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EDITED BY

Ian McAllister

Australian National University

Steve Dowrick

Australian National University

Riaz Hassan

Flinders University of South Australia



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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2003

Printed in Australia by Ligare Pty Ltd

Typeface Joanna (Monotype) 10.5/13 pt. System QuarkXPress® [PK]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

National Library of Australia Cataloguing in Publication data
The Cambridge handbook of the social sciences in Australia.
Bibliography.
Includes index.
ISBN 0 521 82216 5.
I. Social sciences – Australia. I. Hassan, Riaz.
II. McAllister, Ian, 1950– . III. Dowrick, Steve.
IV. Title: Handbook of the social sciences in Australia.
300.994

ISBN 0 521 82216 5 hardback

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Contributors

Kym Anderson is professor of economics and associate dean (research) in the School of Economics, and foundation executive director of the Centre for International Economic Studies, at the University of Adelaide. He has been a research fellow of Europe's London-based Centre for Economic Policy Research since 1992, and a fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia since 1994.

Patricia Apps is professor of public economics in the Faculty of Law, University of Sydney, adjunct professor, Faculty of Business, University of Technology, Sydney, and research fellow at the Institute for the Study of Labour (IZA), Bonn, and the Economics Program, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University. Her research focuses on taxation and welfare policy, and she specialises in modelling household decisions on labour supply, saving behaviour and fertility. She is a fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia.

Scott Baum is an Australian Research Council research fellow in the Centre for Research into Sustainable Urban and Regional Futures at the University of Queensland. Trained in sociology and economics, his research interests are in the socioeconomic aspects of urban and regional transformation, including distributional equity, housing and global city functions. He holds a PhD in sociology from Flinders University of South Australia.

Janeen Baxter is associate professor in sociology in the School of Social Science, University of Queensland. She has published extensively in the area of gender inequality in paid and unpaid work. She is involved in a longitudinal study of household organisation and labour-force involvement over the life course, and is writing a monograph on this project (with Edith Gray, Australian National University), examining the effect of marriage on various social outcomes for men and women.

Peter Beilharz is professor of sociology and director of the Thesis Eleven Centre for Critical Theory at La Trobe University. He co-founded the journal *Thesis Eleven* in 1980. He was professor of Australian studies at Harvard University, 1999–2000, and has been a visitor at Amsterdam, Tokyo, São Paulo, Mexico City, Canberra, Chapel Hill and Manila. He is author or editor of sixteen books, including *Labour's Utopias*, *Transforming Labor*, *Postmodern Socialism*, *Imagining the Antipodes* and *Zygmunt Bauman – Dialectic of Modernity*.

Stephen Bell is associate professor in the School of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Queensland. His research interests focus on business politics, political economy and the politics of economic policy. He has published widely in leading Australian and international journals and is the author or editor of six books.

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His most recent books are *Ungoverning the Economy: The Political Economy of Australian Economic Policy*, *The Unemployment Crisis: Which Way Out?* and *The Institutional Dynamics of Australian Economic Governance: The State, the Market and Networks*. He is working on a book dealing with the politics of monetary policy and the policy independence of the Reserve Bank of Australia.

Jeff Bennett is professor of environmental management in the National Centre for Development Studies at the Australian National University. His research interests focus on the development and application of techniques used to estimate non-market environmental values and the role of the private sector in providing nature-protection benefits.

Jeff Borland is professor of economics at the University of Melbourne. He has also held visiting positions at the Australian National University, University of Iowa, and University of Wisconsin–Madison. His main research interests are analysis of the operation of labour markets in Australia, and applications of microeconomic theory to labour markets. He was elected in 2002 as a fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia.

Gary D. Bouma is professor of sociology at Monash University, priest in the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne, chair of the Christian Research Association and vice-president of the World Conference on Religion and Peace (Australia). His research in the sociology of religion examines the emergence of spiritualities and the management of religious diversity in plural multicultural societies, religion and public policy, and gender factors in clergy careers.

Chilla Bulbeck holds the remaining named chair of women's studies in Australia, at Adelaide University's Department of Social Inquiry, where she teaches gender studies and social-science subjects. She has published widely on issues of gender and difference, including *Re-Orienting Western Feminisms: Women's Diversity in a Post-Colonial World* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), *Living Feminism: The Impact of the Women's Movement on Three Generations of Australian Women* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), and *Australian Women in Papua New Guinea: Colonial Passages 1920–1960* (Cambridge University Press, 1992).

Steve Dowrick is professor of economics at the Australian National University and Australian Research Council senior research fellow. His current research concerns international comparisons of real income and the sources of economic growth.

Kathryn Dwan holds a Bachelor of Science (Hons) and a Bachelor of Arts, and is completing her doctoral thesis at the University of Queensland. Her thesis focuses on the interactions between general practitioners and federal health bureaucrats, and the consequences for the delivery of health care. She is working with John Western on a long-term longitudinal study of the professions in Australia, and was part of the team that recently undertook a nationally representative survey of IT use among Australian GPs.

David M. Farrell is a Jean Monnet chair in European Politics at the University of Manchester. A specialist in the study of parties and electoral systems, David Farrell edits the

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journals *Party Politics* and *Representation*. He is author of *Electoral Systems: A Comparative Introduction* (Palgrave, 2001), and is completing a book with Ian McAllister on Australia's electoral systems.

Bruce Felmingham is reader in the School of Economics at the University of Tasmania. He was formerly dean of the Faculty of Commerce and Law (1999 to 2001). He has authored or co-authored many journal articles on a broad range of economic and finance topics, and is a co-author of *Money and Finance in the Australian Economy* with William Coleman.

Brian Galligan has been a professor of political science at the University of Melbourne since 1995, and previously was a professor in the Research School of Social Science at the Australian National University. His research interests are focused on Australian politics and political economy. Areas of particular interest include constitutional design, the politics of the High Court, citizenship and rights protection, and Australian political history and political economy.

Jane Hall is professor of health economics in the Faculty of Business at the University of Technology, Sydney, and the founding director of the Centre for Health Economics Research and Evaluation. Her research interests cover individual decision-making about health services and the consequences for health care utilisation and expenditure, and for individual and social welfare. She has a strong commitment to the translation of research into policy.

Riaz Hassan is professor of sociology at the Flinders University of South Australia. He has also been visiting professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, and Yale University. His publications include *Faithlines: Muslim Conceptions of Islam and Society* (Oxford University Press, 2002) and *Suicide Explained: The Australian Experience* (Melbourne University Press, 1995), and he edited *Singapore: Society in Transition* (Oxford University Press, 1977). He has published many papers in professional journals. He is a fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia.

Lynda Herbert-Cheshire is a postdoctoral research fellow with the School of Social Science at the University of Queensland. Her recently completed doctoral thesis, entitled 'Self-help as discursive practice', examined the rise of self-help in contemporary rural-development policy in Australia. Her current research interests lie in issues of rural governance, community development and socioeconomic change in single-industry and peri-urban regions.

Christine Inglis is director of the Multicultural Research Centre at the University of Sydney and a former vice-president of the International Sociological Association and president of its Research Committee on Ethnic, Race and Minority Relations. Her research focus is on migration and ethnic relations in Australia and the Asia-Pacific. Current projects examine the migration of British and Chinese professionals, and transnationalism and identity among Chinese, Filipino, Turkish and Vietnamese in Australia.

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Simon Jackman is an associate professor in the Department of Political Science, Stanford University. He is a graduate of the University of Queensland and the University of Rochester, and spent 1996–97 at the Australian National University. He has published widely on Australian electoral politics and electoral systems. His current research focuses on politics in the United States, France and Australia.

Adam Jamrozik is associate professor in the Department of Sociology, Flinders University. For a number of years he worked as senior research fellow at the Social Welfare Research Centre (later renamed the Social Policy Research Centre), University of New South Wales. His publications on social policy and related areas include such books as *Social Change and Cultural Transformation in Australia*, *The Sociology of Social Problems* and *Social Policy in the Post-Welfare State*.

Glenn Jones is a senior lecturer in economics in the School of Economics and Financial Studies, Macquarie University. His research falls into the broad area of public economics, with an emphasis on modelling the equity and efficiency effects of policy reforms, using utility-consistent models of behaviour estimated at the level of individual decision units. The major areas of application are labour supply and work disincentives, and tax-transfer policy.

Stephen King is professor of economics at the University of Melbourne and professor of management (economics) at the Melbourne Business School. He specialises in applied microeconomics, regulation and industrial organisation, and his research has been published widely in Australian and international journals. He has been consulted by government and private organisations on issues relating to national competition policy and regulation, and has provided expert evidence on infrastructure industries to regulatory tribunals and the courts in Australia.

Chandran Kukathas teaches political theory in the School of Politics, University College, University of New South Wales, at the Australian Defence Force Academy. He is the author of *Hayek and Modern Liberalism* (Oxford University Press, 1989) and co-author of *The Australian Political System* (Addison Wesley Longman, 2nd ed., 1998). His latest book, *The Liberal Archipelago: A Theory of Diversity and Freedom*, will be published by Oxford University Press in 2003.

Geoffrey Lawrence is professor of sociology and head of the School of Social Science at the University of Queensland. He was previously foundation professor of sociology and executive director of the Institute for Sustainable Regional Development at Central Queensland University. Recent books include *A Future for Regional Australia: Escaping Global Misfortune* (Cambridge University Press, 2001) and *Environment, Society and Natural Resource Management: Theoretical Perspectives from Australasia and the Americas* (Edward Elgar, 2001).

Stewart Lockie is director of the Centre for Social Science Research and senior lecturer in Rural and Environmental Sociology at Central Queensland University. His current

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research addresses food production and consumption, natural-resource management in agriculture, social-impact assessment and coastal-zone management. He is coeditor of *Critical Landcare* (Centre for Social Science Research, 1997), *Rurality Bites: The Social and Environmental Transformation of Rural Australia* (Pluto Press, 2001), *Consuming Foods, Sustaining Environments* (Australian Academic Press, 2000) and *Environment, Society and Natural Resource Management: Theoretical Perspectives from Australasia and the Americas* (Edward Elgar, 2001).

Ian Marsh is associate professor in political science in the Research School of Social Science at the Australian National University. He is the author of *Beyond the Two Party System*, and his current research interests are in the erosion of the electoral standing of the major parties; interest groups and (particularly) new social movements as agents of representation; the erosion of systemic strategic policy-making capacity; and debates about 'correct' policy responses to globalisation and 'the knowledge economy'.

Bill Martin is associate professor in the Department of Sociology, Flinders University. His current research interests are in the professions and management, social class, organisations, and social stratification.

Ian McAllister is director of the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University. He has recently co-authored *How Russia Votes* (Chatham House, 1997) and *The Australian Political System* (Addison Wesley Longman, 1998). He has directed the Australian Election Study since 1987, and was president of the British Politics Group of the American Political Science Association in 2001–02. His main research interests are in the areas of comparative political behaviour, political parties, voters and electoral systems.

Peter McDonald has been head of the Demography and Sociology Program in the Research School of Social Sciences of the Australian National University since 1996. He is also co-director of the Australian Centre for Population Research. In recent years, his research has focused on explanations of low fertility rates in advanced countries, and the implications of population dynamics for ageing and the labour force. He is a fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia and a council member of the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population.

George Messinis is a research fellow, Innovation and Pharmaceuticals Projects, Centre for Strategic Economic Studies, Victoria University. He holds a PhD in economics from the University of Melbourne. His research interests are multidisciplinary, and he has specialised in consumer psychology and knowledge, having published articles in this area in leading international journals.

Patrick Mullins is a reader in sociology at the University of Queensland. He conducts research into social aspects of urbanisation in the post-Fordist era, social polarisation and household consumption.

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Jake M. Najman has a joint appointment as director of the Queensland Alcohol and Drug Research and Education Centre, School of Population Health, and professor of sociology in the School of Social Science, University of Queensland. He has co-authored and coedited six monographs and more than 150 research papers, and is a fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences and a board member of the Queensland Fertility Group Research Foundation. He serves on the National Health and Medical Research Council's National Illicit Drug Strategy Research Committee, and the council's Chronic Disease Research Committee. He is also a member of the Wesley Research Institute.

Elim Papadakis is professor of modern European studies in the School of Social Sciences, and director of the National Europe Centre, at the Australian National University. He is author of several books including *Environmental Politics and Institutional Change* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), and numerous articles and chapters on environmental policy and politics. In 1999 he was co-recipient of the Robert M. Worcester Award for an article published in the *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, and in 2001 of the Henry Mayer Prize for the best article published in the *Australian Journal of Political Science*.

John Quiggin is an Australian Research Council professorial fellow in economics. He is prominent as a research economist and as a commentator on Australian economic policy. He has published more than 600 research articles, books and reports in fields including risk analysis, production economics, and the theory of economic growth. He has also written on policy topics including unemployment policy, microeconomic reform, privatisation, competitive tendering, and the economics of education.

John Ravenhill is chair of politics, University of Edinburgh, on leave from his chair in the International Relations Department, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University. His recent books include *APEC and the Construction of Pacific Rim Regionalism* and *The Asian Financial Crisis and the Architecture of Global Finance*, both published by Cambridge University Press.

Patty Renfrow lectures in the School of Business at the University of Queensland. She has a longstanding interest in gender issues in politics and the public sector, and is conducting research on gender and voting in the Australian electorate.

Christian Reus-Smit is senior fellow and head in the Department of International Relations, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University. He is the author of *The Moral Purpose of the State* (Princeton University Press, 1999), co-author of *Theories of International Relations* (Macmillan, 2001), and coeditor of *Between Sovereignty and Global Governance* (Macmillan, 1998).

Sharyn L. Roach Anleu is professor of sociology at Flinders University, Adelaide, and immediate past president of the Australian Sociological Association. She is one of three

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editors of the *Journal of Sociology*, and is the author of *Law and Social Change* (Sage, 2000) and three editions of *Deviance, Conformity and Control* (Longman, 1991, 1995, 1999). She is undertaking research with Kathy Mack on magistrates and their courts in Australia.

Peter Saunders has been the director of the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales since 1987. He was elected a fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (ASSA) in 1995, and is a member of the Australian Research Council Expert Advisory Committee on the Social, Behavioural and Economic Sciences. His main research interests include inequality and income distribution, poverty, social security and the economics of the welfare state.

Elizabeth Savage is a senior lecturer in the Centre for Health Economics Research and Evaluation, University of Technology, Sydney. Her research focuses on behavioural modelling, welfare measurement and policy simulation, with applications in the areas of taxation, family assistance, public-sector pricing, health insurance and health care utilisation. She has undertaken research for the Productivity Commission, Office of the Economic Planning Advisory Commission, World Bank, the New South Wales Committee on Ageing, and the National Women's Consultative Council.

Campbell Sharman was a member of the Political Science Department at the University of Western Australia for many years, and remains involved with the UWA Australian Government and Politics project and its associated website. He holds an honorary position at the University of British Columbia, where he is continuing work on the analysis of long-run data on elections, parties, representation and parliamentary government in Australia and Canada. He is joint editor of *Australian Government and Politics: The Commonwealth, the States and the Territories* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Peter Sheehan is director of the Centre for Strategic Economic Studies at Victoria University. His primary research interest is the impact of the knowledge economy, including the application of knowledge (innovation), in developed and developing countries. In addition to an extensive academic career at the University of Melbourne, Australian National University and Victoria University, he has filled senior roles in the Australian and Victorian governments, and with small, innovating Australian companies.

Philip Smith is an associate professor in the School of Social Science, University of Queensland. From the beginning of 2003, he will take up an appointment in the Department of Sociology at Yale University.

John Wanna is professor of public policy in the School of Politics and Public Policy at Griffith University. His research interests include public policy, public-sector management, government–business relations and budgetary processes, and community power and urban politics.

Graeme Wells is a reader in economics in the School of Economics at the Australian National University. Prior to joining the ANU in 1989, he was in the economics depart-

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ment at Victoria University of Wellington. He has held visiting positions at the University of Oslo, the New Zealand Institute of Economic Research, the New Zealand Treasury, University of California at Santa Barbara, and the University of Guelph. His research interests are in applied macroeconomics and monetary economics.

Brad West is a lecturer in the Department of Sociology, Flinders University of South Australia. He is the coeditor (with D. Walker) of *War and Peace* (University of Queensland Press, forthcoming).

John Western obtained his PhD from Columbia University in the early 1960s. He has thirty years of experience in basic and applied social research, with an emphasis on the professions and work, social stratification and social inequality, and the criminal justice system. In particular, he is the author of *Social Inequality in Australian Society* (1983), and in his retirement aims to bring to a close the thirty-year longitudinal study of the professions in Australia, as well as revisiting his book on social inequality.

Glenn Withers is professor of public policy at the Australian National University. He is a Monash and Harvard graduate, and publishes in policy economics, labour economics and cultural policy. He has also chaired a number of government inquiries and bodies, including the National Population Council and the Economic Planning Advisory Commission. He was made an Officer of the Order of Australia for services to applied economics, and is a fellow of the Australian Academy of Social Sciences.

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Preface and Acknowledgements

As the title makes clear, this is a book that examines the current state of social-science research about Australia. The aim of the book is to provide a comprehensive summary and evaluation of what we know about Australian society at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Most contemporary works dealing with the social sciences take an explicitly international perspective: for example, world summaries can be found in the *World Social Science Report* (UNESCO, 1999), the *Handbook of Social Science Research*, by Gary Bouma and G.B.J. Atkinson (Oxford, 1996), and the *Social Science Encyclopedia*, by Adam Kuper and Jessica Kuper (Routledge, 1989). Particular studies dealing with individual disciplines have also generally followed this international emphasis. Why, then, a book that examines Australia only?

While Australian social science – like that of its overseas counterparts of similar size – has been derivative of the international social sciences, the past half century has seen the emergence of a more independent, innovative research culture with specific contributions to make. In many important respects, this distinct contribution has been lost or ignored in international works of social-science scholarship, and often only those contributions by Australians that address international problems have warranted attention. Yet Australia has maintained a social-science research culture for at least as long as its international counterparts, with a research council being formed during World War II and a research-only faculty immediately afterwards. After the natural scientists, social scientists are the largest group of scholars working in Australian universities.

A second reason for examining social-science research about Australia is the international contribution social science has made in dealing with distinctively Australian problems. The relative newness of the country, the comparatively small size of the political and governmental elites, and a longstanding tradition of constructive interchange with government at all levels on matters of policy have all combined to make Australian social scientists more influential at a practical and policy level than many of their counterparts overseas. Distinctive Australian contributions, stemming from the analysis of local conditions and problems, have been particularly innovative. For example, Australia's academic contributions to social welfare, to the study of immigration and ethnicity, and to the design of electoral systems have all stemmed from our distinctive local conditions, and from a readiness on the part of government and the bureaucracy to formulate policy based on the results of this research.

Any overview of an area as diverse and complex as the social sciences is necessarily likely to be selective. When the overview is based on the social sciences within a single country, the selectivity is likely to be even more marked. The chapters that constitute this *Handbook* contain many insights and observations, but many other works are necessarily excluded, either because of space limitations or because of the structure of the chapters. We combine the contributions around the three core social sciences – economics, political science and sociology – and the introduction discusses why we have

Cambridge University Press

0521822165 - The Cambridge Handbook of the Social Sciences in Australia

Edited by Ian McAllister, Steve Dowrick and Riaz Hassan

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followed this tripartite distinction. But throughout the *Handbook*, we treat these three fields as generic; each incorporates much overlap, between each of them, and also with other areas of scholarly research.

An intellectual endeavour as large and complex as the *Handbook* incurs many intellectual debts. First and foremost, we are grateful to Peter Debus, from Cambridge University Press, who offered both encouragement and patience as the project took shape. We are also grateful to three anonymous referees for the original proposal, who all provided important insights and constructive comments that were invaluable at the planning stage. Kate Hoffmann assisted in the preparation of the sociology section of the book. Most obviously, we are grateful to the forty-five contributors who provided the entries contained herein.

I.McA., Canberra

S.D., Canberra

R.H., Adelaide