Trouble down the Track

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David Burchell and Andrew Leigh (eds)
The Prince's New Clothes:
Why Do Australians Dislike Their Politicians?
UNSW Press, $34.95pb, 191pp, 0 86840 604 X

Boris Frankel
When the Boat Comes In:
Transforming Australia in the Age of Globalisation
Pluto Press, $38.95pb, 262pp, 1 86403 171 9

Paul Nursey-Bray and Carol Lee Bacchi (eds)
Left Directions: Is There a Third Way?
UWA Press, $32.95pb, 254pp, 1 876268 64 6

Sean Scalmer
Dissent Events: Protest, the Media and the
Political Gimmick in Australia
UNSW Press, $32.95pb, 218pp, 0 86840 651 1

W E LIVE IN an era of relentless and turbulent change. The impact of globalisation is felt everywhere, particularly in the economic realm. Competitive pressures and endless economic restructuring in the pursuit of profit and growth produce an insecure society. Social division, disconnection and disruption are endemic. A neo-liberal consensus holds sway over anything smacking of public, collectivist, socialist or traditional social democratic approaches. The fostering of deregulated private markets, less government and a more open economy dominates the policy mainstream. While the problems of international terrorism and the movement of refugees have recently engendered strong responses involving military build-up by the Australian government, the neo-liberal consensus has been reinforced. The Third Way, as the main alternative on the centre-left, accepts most of this. Its defence of communitarianism is the closest we get to the values of social democracy in our politics.

These trends seem self-generating. As the rôle of government lessens and market values predominate, an 'anti-political' mood grows, and trust in politicians and political institutions falls away. Political activism is focused around more vociferous and clamorous 'oppositional' stances to neo-liberalism on both sides of politics: on the left, in the protests of the anti-globalisation movements; and, on the right, in the

populist and illiberal reaction of movements like One Nation. Voices of moderation, balance and civility in Australian public life and policy-making are increasingly marginalised, on both the left and the right.

Meanwhile, problems and issues requiring attention — at least from the progressive viewpoint — just mount. The dominance of economic rationalism in national policy continues in the face of confusion and scepticism about it. Inequality worsens. Public institutions and social services atrophy. The issues of indigenous reconciliation, multicultural recognition and national identity continue to fester. Unease about environmental limits grows.

Written mainly, but not exclusively, from left-of-centre viewpoints, the books under review address many of these issues and trends: the changing nature of political protest; the implications of the declining confidence in our political system; the debate about the Third Way as a left alternative to neo-liberalism; and the issue of left strategy and policy in the face of fundamental social change and the rise of the global economy. Taken together, the books offer interesting perspectives on how we come to be at this point in our politics and what options there might be for a better way forward. The picture that emerges is sobering but hopeful.

In an original and creative study, Sean Scalmer's *Dissent Events* presents a theorised history of protest movements in modern Australia from the student and Vietnam Moratorium movements of the 1960s, to Aboriginal, women's and gay activism of the 1970s, to Hanson populism, the anti-Hanson response and the recent anti-globalisation S11 protests.

For Scalmer, the history of modern political protest is shaped by the continual search for new ways of attracting public attention, or by what he calls the 'political gimmick'. Early protests translated methods used in other settings: for example, the Australian Freedom Ride of the mid-1960s drew on methods used by the US civil rights movement. By the late 1960s political protest had entered a period of great ferment and innovation. This saw the dramatic and self-conscious rise in the public 'staging' of protest in which gimmickry multiplied: draft card burning, marches and demonstrations, and sit-ins. New public spaces were created through the disruptive theatricality of performance and expression.

A diffusion of this kind of protest into new areas — feminism, gay liberation and Aboriginal activism — continued through the 1970s, all of which served the libertarian purpose of bringing repressed private and cultural issues into the public domain. In the 1990s new arenas and tools of protest opened up in cyberspace and in the media, making the methods of the 1960s seem complacent.

Scalmer's book shines light on a history that is quite murky. He defends the contribution that disruptive protest makes to the vitality of democracy, regarding it as a force for good: 'Without the shock … gained by theatrical political performance, it would lose its ability to generate publicity and

to stimulate the more measured and moderate political debate that leads to policy change.' Nevertheless, he hints at a decline in the civility of political protest over time. The media saturation of society is partly responsible for this, making for more confused and managed public debate, more clamour for public attention, and more cynical social attitudes.

Scalmer may be overly sanguine about the libertarian politics that drive modern protest movements. The libertarian outlook, while important to the creation of a more democratic society respectful of social and cultural diversity, may subvert other left commitments to more orderly, institutional responses to inequality and exploitation.

The scepticism and sapping of confidence in government, politicians and the public realm more generally is much documented and analysed in the modern democracies. David Burchell and Andrew Leigh's collection addresses these issues in the Australian setting.

The evidence of political disengagement and decline in trust in politicians, political parties and government in Australia are mixed. Murray Goot suggests that there has been some decline in the perception of the ethics and honesty of politicians, an increase in the cynicism of the electorate and a weakening of voter attachment to political parties. But, for him, the change is not enough to speak of the crisis of confidence in our political system.

Andrew Leigh is more concerned about the growing level of distrust in politics. The most significant reasons for this, according to Leigh, are falling levels of interpersonal trust and social capital, the growing importance of post-materialist values in modern societies, reflecting less respect for hierarchical institutions (like government and public organisations), and the rise of a more negative, manipulative, journalist-centred media. Leigh argues that growing distrust has a more adverse impact on social democrats given their commitment to an active rôle in the economy and society.

What should we think about politics in the modern democracies given these trends? The answers suggested by many of the contributors to *The Prince's New Clothes* can be summarised as a worldly acknowledgment of the realities of politics and its imperatives against any idealistic view of politics and its possibilities. We should lower our expectations and better recognise the context within which politicians and governments work.

Jan Wade, Bob Hogg and Jeff Shaw — as former ministers and political advisers — see no deep-seated problem, but suggest that things would be improved were parties and governments to show more respect for democratic processes, and by better behaviour in parliament. Hogg advocates the establishment of an independent Commission of Ethics to oversee the parliament.

At a more theoretical level, David Burchell and Jeffrey Minson defend a 'realist' view of politics. Against ideas of sovereign government and the pursuit of happiness through politics, and in a complex engagement with Max Weber's and Bernard Crick's arguments about politics as a vocation, Burchell invites us to adopt a stance of 'perpetual disillusionment' with politics. Minson defends the idea of 'an office-based civil political ethics' in which the imperatives of serving the state and the public interest are recognised as messy and conflictual, as entailing the making of enemies, but nevertheless reflecting a measure of 'lower' moral judgment.

Overall, the Burchell and Leigh collection is a sobering reminder of the character and limits of politics. From a progressive viewpoint, the message is deflating. Improving the accountability and behaviour of politicians and governments might help raise public confidence in our political system. However, the book does not say much about the appropriate ends and purposes of modern politics. Some of the contributors worry about the impact of declining trust on the pursuit of social democratic purposes. How a 'realist' should deal with that issue is not explored.

Defenders of the Third Way have tried to revive social democracy by accepting the neo-liberal defence of markets and the growing importance of the libertarian outlook in contemporary politics, and tailoring their defence of left values and policies accordingly. Paul Nursey-Bray and Carol Lee Bacchi's collection critically examines Third Way ideas from a range of leftist viewpoints.

Third Way thought is a heady brew. Reformist ideas overflow. As Mark Latham, Geoff Gallop and the Brotherhood of St Laurence's Nicholas Francis distil it in *Left Directions*, key Third Way ideas include the dispersal of power, equality of opportunity, communitarian mutualism, social entrepreneurialism, the managerialist state, and investment in education attuned to the imperatives of the 'new' economy. The overall stance defends an open-market economy with strong social standards achieved mainly through communitarian means.

The core of *Left Directions* is taken up with a leftist critique of the Third Way. Paul Nursey-Bray contrasts the Third Way idea of community with the idea of 'socialist community' and the stronger notions of equality, need, liberty and democracy that go with it. For him, the Third Way 'is limited by its acceptance of divisions, of inequalities, of disempowerments and its tendency to give priority to profit rather than need'. Doug McEachern contrasts the Third Way with the idea of 'classical social democracy'. The classical model is much stronger in its commitment to equality and the public means of achieving it, even if political disengagement in the contemporary era work against putting it into practice. Clem Macintyre criticises the individualism that lies at the heart of mutual obligation in welfare provision, embraced by both neo-liberals and Third Wayers. Greg McCarthy sees the Third Way preoccupations with education, mutual obligation and technological change as disconnected from the class structures of the new capitalism and their corrosive

impact on the working class and the distribution of work. Carol Lee Bacchi defends a social and political conception of 'difference' against what she sees as the Third Way's individualised, apolitical view. Building political coalitions between diverse social groups would, for her, facilitate the pursuit of both redistribution and the recognition of difference in public policy.

Left Directions is an important collection, if only because it reminds us of the intellectual and political distance that needs to be travelled before a strong and robust leftist alternative to neo-liberalism will emerge. Holding the Third Way up against a range of socialist principles and ideas is bracing even if the various communitarian, collectivist and liberal themes running through the critiques don't cohere.

Boris Frankel's *When the Boat Comes In* defends a left political and policy alternative to both neo-liberalism and the Third Way. Frankel is deeply critical of the neo-liberal consensus in Australian politics that started in the Hawke–Keating period and has gathered pace since. Against the prevailing glow about Australia's economic success through the 1980s and 1990s, Frankel suggests that we may come to see the era as one of profound sociocultural loss and major policy failure. For Frankel, Australia now faces a political, economic and social landscape that poses great difficulties for progressive reform. We face a much more fractured political scene with deeply opposed views about nationalism, liberalism and how to accommodate economic globalisation. Finance capital and shareholder value grow in influence in our economic system in ways that undermine equality, produce higher levels of debt and encourage ever more structural, profit-seeking change. Australian society is much more unequal and unstable. There is greater stress on individuals and families to provide for themselves while more conflictual two-class pension and health care systems have emerged. Frankel argues that these social weaknesses may combine with Australia's economic weaknesses in ways that produce trouble down the track. Lack of systematic attention to manufacturing industry and greater levels of casual employment and unemployment may make it difficult to generate the levels of return that underpin the asset and equity growth upon which the neo-liberal shareholder strategy depends.

Frankel's alternative? Basically, a reformist strategy that accommodates the growing economic and political influences of finance and shareholder interests. A central expression of that influence has been the growth of superannuation savings in Australia. Frankel would marshal a small proportion of those savings for investment in social and environmental projects whose purposes would be to reduce unemployment and poverty. He defends this strategy as the only tactically sensible direction for left reform to take in the current era.

Again, one comes away somewhat disappointed by this argument. It indicates the influence on Frankel's argument of discredited neo-Marxist assumptions about the bedrock of economic structures determining the parameters of politics in capitalist democracy. It also reflects a left libertarian opposition to government and public intervention in Australian society.

Another tactical response to the impasse Frankel identifies is to argue that the more you accept the parameters of capitalism and neo-liberalism, the more you will reproduce them. There is nothing much to suggest that it isn't better simply to defend a robust decommodification of Australian society seeing the re-emergence of a genuinely mixed economy. This might better guarantee employment, social stability and equality. It has wider public support than many believe. It isn't inconsistent with the communitarian and mutualist commitments of the Third Wayers, but it would involve putting to rest the widely held view on both the left and the right that liberal values are inconsistent with robust social democratic ones.