individual pieces of evidence, rather references are generalised at the back for each section of the text. The scope of the book leaves little room for more than basic presentation of ideas. There is brief mention in the conclusion of the fact that colonisation “represents the success of the bourgeois revolution in Australia” and “the complete and violent overthrow of one social economic system, one mode of production, by another”. Yet there is little attempt throughout the book to place the fate of Aborigines in the broader context of world economic development. The thirst for land that killed and dispossessed so many Aboriginal people is not linked with, for instance, the needs of Britain’s textile industry. Only brief mention is made of the British government’s original stated concern for the natives in the face of its sanction of the theft of their land, and the contradictory sanctity of property of the new regime.

But while the lack of development of such themes may be a weakness, it also attests to the scope of the book. Frontier probably does not introduce new ideas to anyone acquainted with Aboriginal history. What it does is try to make Aboriginal history more generally recognised as Australian history. The history of European settlement is inextricably tied to the fate of the original owners of the soil. Reynolds neatly sums up the issues, providing a compact rationale to the land rights supporter and a devastatingly persuasive introduction to the alternative, so-long-suppressed history of Australia.

If one doesn’t accept that Aborigines’ rights to land were extinguished in 1788 (and you can hardly do that having read Frontier) then, writes Reynolds, “Aboriginal land rights were extinguished not by official edict but by force, district by district, over many decades. The gradual eviction has gone on throughout Australian history. It has continued up to the present. The moral responsibility for the dispossession was not the burden of any one group or even a particular period of Australian history. It is shared by all generations of white Australians. The modern land rights movement embodies the same moral dilemmas as those faced by early governors and officials. Time has passed, but we have not escaped from our history”. (p.179)

It is almost cliche to remind Australians of the self-assessment that should go hand-in-hand with the lavish self-congratulation governments are planning for next year. Yet, reading this book one can only join in gasping with indignation “What is there to celebrate?” History is only now being rewritten. Reynolds’ book is a major addition to that rewriting. And a third volume is promised, dealing with the incorporation of Aborigines into the European economy and the policies of assimilation and segregation. A major rethinking of the past and a new look at the present would be a much better thing to celebrate in 1988.

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Fantasies?


The New Right’s Australian Fantasy is the culmination of a sustained campaign by Ken Coghill, Victorian Labor MP (and secretary to John Cain’s Cabinet) against the emergence of the newly aggressive Right. Even had he not edited this book, Coghill’s activities would have been noteworthy, rare as it is for a Labor parliamentarian to research and campaign against such an ideologically-focussed extra-parliamentary political force.

The title of the book is taken from a chapter by John Button, federal Minister for Industry, Technology and Commerce, who states that “in the shifting sands of political priorities and fashion there is a significant element of theology and fantasy, and that’s equally true of the political Right as of the political Left”. Button refers mainly to the New Right’s “fantasy”, although what led to the use of that term was one of the Labor Left’s “fantasies” — the proposed nationalisation of the Commonwealth Oil Refineries and Carlton and United Breweries (the former privatised by Menzies).

Button’s presence as a contributor highlights the main weakness of the collection: its silence about the symbiosis between Labor’s post-1983 conservatism and the emergence of the New Right.

At one point in his chapter, Button lists the reasons for the
establishment of Australia’s public corporations — adding that this exercise is useful “for a consideration of which functions are truly public sector ones and which might be capable of equally utilitarian private sector ownership or control”.

While I don’t believe the Left should be locked into a stance which says that every single part of the public sector must be retained on principle, it’s a pity none of the contributors address the way the New Right’s agenda, including privatisation, has been assisted onto the stage by the Hawke-Keating strategy for Labor.

A number of the contributors are fairly pedestrian in their critiques — something perhaps which is partly due to the method of basing a book on conference papers.

One of the best chapters is Dennis Altman’s “Tilting the political globe” which goes beyond damning the New Right to attempt to understand why it has managed to shift the terms of the political agenda. Altman criticises the inadequacy of that form of leftwing analysis of the New Right which has limited itself to three themes: privatisation, attacks on the union movement and the emergence of New Right think-tanks.

The real success of the New Right, he argues, “has been its ability to tie together a number of not necessarily related programs, and through clever political campaigning, present them as offering a more attractive picture of society, as it is and as it could be, than we on the Left currently seem able to provide”.

He points to the successful mix of the ideology of individual selfishness and moral conservatism which propelled Reagan into power, and notes that “in general the Australian Left does not regard issues such as abortion, homosexuality, pornography etc. as somehow being ‘real politics’ in the same way as is, say, industrial relations”.

In this respect, John Howard’s invocation of “the family” in his economic policies in the recent election campaign was instructive, although many on the Left tend to dismiss this as flummery to cover his “real” aims.

The left must recapture the notion of freedom and provide an alternative vision of society to meet the challenge of the New Right. Altman argues in his all too brief chapter.

Bernie Taft also makes a number of useful points, arguing that “the voices of the New Right strike a chord in the experience of ordinary people. They express some of the difficulties, dissatisfaction and alienation that many people feel in our society. The campaign against the public sector takes advantage of the fact that people have had negative experiences with inefficient, high-handed and uncaring bureaucracies in government departments”.

The struggle against the New Right not only involves exposing its false, inhuman and irrational policies, but also putting our own house in order, he concludes.

Ken Coghill and his contributors have produced a useful book which, most importantly, takes the Right seriously and undermines their logic and policies. It’s a great pity it stops short of discussing that dialectic between Labor and the New Right which may, ultimately, despite the recent election result, bring a version of Thatcherism to Australia.

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Eternally indebted


With talk of complete collapse of the international financial system, Western governments blamed the bankers, the bankers blamed the Western governments. Their forum and negotiating table: the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Last year, Zed Books released an English translation of a work by four young social scientists published in their native German in 1984: The IMF and the Debt Crisis. It’s one of a plethora spawned by the so-called debt crisis; no doubt seen in the Third World as a credit squeeze.

The highlight of this new edition is its simple, straightforward account of the IMF’s contemporary role as “crisis manager” of Third World indebted economies. The text might appear, on the face of it, indefensibly biased, because the authors are highly critical of the IMF. But even Henry Kissinger has damned the terms of IMF stabilisation programs which “create instability”, “lead to revolutionary conditions”, and