

## BOOK REVIEWS

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***Agenda for the Nineties: Australian Choices in Foreign and Defence Policy.* Edited by Coral Bell.** Longman Cheshire, 1991. 315 pp.

In her Foreword to this wide-ranging collection of essays, Coral Bell remarks: "The specific objective has been to look primarily at the background against which Australian decision-makers and policy-makers will have to make national choices . . .". The keyword is "background". Few of the essays in this book examine specific, or "foreground" problems facing Australia and, where they do so, prescriptive remedies are offered only in generalized terms, if at all. Jim Richardson's elegant concluding essay, "Debates and Options for Australia", does much to pull together the diverse themes of the book, but he underlines Bell's point about its objective: "It has not been the aim of the present book to examine the specific and immediate foreign policy agenda: by now a substantial literature is available on most of Australia's major relationships and on most of the immediate foreign policy issues. The book has attempted the more daunting task of exploring the kind of context which Australia and its decision-makers may confront in the 1990s".

While it may be unfair to criticize a book on the basis of what it does not attempt to do, I found myself frustrated by the vagueness with which many of these essays related "context" to Australian decision-making. The last thing needed in Australia, to be sure, is intensified introspection. Yet Richardson's point could surely be stood on its head very easily. Is it not the case that the literature on "contexts" — whether of global power balances, environmental problems, or world trade — is far more substantial and available than the literature on Australia's major relationships and

immediate foreign policy challenges? And is not the “more daunting task”, therefore, not the re-examination of these contexts, but the strenuous effort to discern Australia’s options within them? The chief weakness of this book, in my view, is that too many of the essays do not make that strenuous effort, but simply reiterate things already widely discussed in Australia and abroad.

The pattern of the book is set, perhaps appropriately, by Coral Bell’s opening essay, “The Changing Central Balance and Australian Policy”. The essay is overwhelmingly devoted to a reflection on the global geopolitical implications of the passing of the U.S.–Soviet cold war (pp. 1–18). Two paragraphs, on pages 20–21, are specifically devoted to Australia’s outlook in the 1990s and these are rather otiose, merely suggesting that Australia will remain a useful ally of the United States “for the foreseeable future” and “has no cause to quarrel with any of the six potential central balance powers”. Those six, of course, are the USA, the USSR, the European Community, the People’s Republic of China, Japan and India. The essay’s chief point, as I read it, is that the transition from a bilateral to a multilateral balance of power bodes well, since “bilateral balances have tended to produce cataclysmic wars for the society of states concerned”. With a historical vision that seems to reflect the Metternichian sympathies of her hero Henry Kissinger, Bell observes: “The experience of the nineteenth century society of states, mostly dominated by multilateral balances, encourages the hope that the decision-makers of the twenty-first century society of states may do at least as well.” They must, of course, do far better, since the nineteenth century system she looks back on with such complacency sowed all the seeds of the catastrophe that began in Europe in 1914 and climaxed with its ruin and East-West division in 1945. Nor can the world outside Europe have much desire for a return to the international conditions that prevailed for them in the European nineteenth century! In any case, Bell leaves Australia’s prospects in this multilateral world restored terribly vague. U.S.-Japanese frictions “may provide painful dilemmas for countries like Australia”, she observes, but specifies no particular prospective dilemma, much less how we might cope with it. Her conclusion: “. . . the 1990s look promising in many respects . . . a stressful journey probably, though certainly an interesting one”, is rendered vacuous by the fact that Australia’s possible journeys through the 1990s are neither charted nor examined in her essay.

Similar remarks might be made, *mutatis mutandis*, in regard to Alan Burnett’s essay “Defence of the Environment: The New Issue in International Relations”; Trevor Findlay’s essay “Arms Control Ascendant”; Bob Miller’s “The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe: An Upsurge of People’s Power”; Gary Klintworth’s “China: Advance and Retreat?”; Coral

Bell's "Japan and East Asia: Portents of Change"; Leszek Buszynski's "ASEAN and Its Orbit"; and Sandy Gordon's "India: Nation, Neighbourhood and Region". Of all these papers, the last is the only one that mentions Australia, and even then only in the final sentence, which warns of a "challenging process of adjustment for Australia", the elements of which are neither presented nor examined. It is not that these essays are marred by poor scholarship or reasoning that prompts criticism, for they are all sound enough in these respects. Rather it is that, in a book entitled *Agenda for the Nineties: Australian Choices in Foreign and Defence Policy*, they fail to discuss Australia at all, construct no agenda and offer no choices. If only these papers were included, the book might more aptly have been called *Some Interesting Things That Are Happening in the World Around Us*.

The essays by Stuart Harris ("Economic Changes in the International System: Implications for Australia's Prospects"), John Piper ("Pacific Challenges: The Islands and New Zealand"), Richard Higgott ("The New Europe"), Ross Babbage ("The Australian-United States Alliance"), and Jim Richardson ("Debates And Options for Australia"), give some substance to the book's title. Perhaps this is in part because the first four have a sustained professional interest in the specifically Australian concern with the spheres they examine here. This is not so true of the other contributors to the book, with the possible exception of Gary Klintworth and Sandy Gordon. Stuart Harris and John Piper, especially, bring a wealth of experience in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to their papers.

Personally, I found the papers by Harris and Higgott the most stimulating in the book, though Richardson's concluding piece has a special place in the collection and certainly enhances the book as a whole. My preference is due not only to the fact that these authors actually address an Australian agenda and ponder Australian choices — for Piper and Babbage do likewise — but to their specific concern with Australia's precarious economic position in the international trading system of the 1990s. While Richardson offers some thoughtful caveats to the proposition, it seems that the greatest challenge to Australian sovereignty (or at least to its vitality) in the 1990s is that of economic solvency. These two essays directly address that issue. Of the two, Harris's is the more economically analytical and has not, like Higgott's, been overtaken in various details by recent events.

Compared with Bell's enthusiasm for the breakdown of the cold war scheme of things, Harris takes cognizance of the unsettling implications — especially for a country like Australia — of the multilateralization of the international trading system, as U.S. economic hegemony continues to wane. His argument proceeds from the important premise that

“free trade will not occur on its own but has to be imposed”; with the corollary that where the hegemonic power is in decline and begins to seek to protect itself, the liberal system may be unable to survive. Harris observes a “diminishing adherence internationally to rules-based cooperative behaviour” as nations seek to fend off the consequences of rapid economic change, rather than adjusting to it. At the same time, he notes that the growing integration of global capital markets and information flows have “greatly reduced domestic control over economic policy”, undermining economic sovereignty, even as it becomes more and more impossible “for countries to remain apart from the international system”. The emerging “tendency to regionalism” springs from the tensions between burgeoning globalization and eroding national economic sovereignties. What is Australia to do under these circumstances? Harris is firmly of the opinion that “it was in Australia’s interest to reduce protection without waiting for reciprocal benefits”; that it must strive for greater efficiency and productivity not only in its export industries but in all its economic activities; that it has strong interest in pursuing GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) reform; and that the protectionist tendencies of the United States, not the economic dynamism of East Asia, pose the biggest threat to freedom to compete in the major markets. His faith is in internationalism, which he believes will “ultimately prevail”, but he cautions that “the limits of the scope for nationalism provided by the internationalist pressures are easy to underestimate”. Just at this point, one would rather like him to outline a couple of sombre scenarios, but he does not. Moreover, for all his remarks about the erosion of national economic sovereignty by international trends, he calls for the trenchant exercise of just such sovereignty in the national interest, which seems to me to be a paradox that goes to the heart of his economic argument and invites much further examination. Australia, he concludes a little ominously, “must adjust more quickly to changing international circumstances than it has so far shown itself able to do. Domestic institutional change will need to reflect the speed of international institutional or structural change. Its present position indicates so far an inability to do that.” In other words, Australia should impose free trade on itself and hope that agreed rules will re-emerge internationally where they cannot be imposed. The challenges of adjustment under such circumstances will be formidable, but Harris’s claim is that there is no viable alternative.

It is Richardson who most starkly juxtaposes the economic prospects facing Australia in the 1990s: “The worst of all worlds for Australia [would be] a world of hostile trading blocs; but a global economy in which giant oligopolies, financial institutions and transnational coalitions pursue their interests with greater autonomy than governments will not be a comfortable one for small countries like Australia, however skilful their

policies". The pressures of both economic and environmental change are coming to a head, he observes, "at a time when the ruling ideology is an uncritical celebration of market forces and a denigration of the role of government in seeking to regulate them in the name of larger social goals". Challenging the prescription of "simple economic solutions" — notably the Garnaut Report's emphasis on the total removal of protection for Australian industry by 2000 — Richardson calls for a wide-ranging study of "the potential role of the Australian state, drawing on experience elsewhere — not only the NIEs, but also examples such as France and Germany".

He goes further, in calling for a "kind of cultural revolution" in Australia. The term, of course, has unfortunate connotations, but he plainly has nothing very Maoist in mind. "How", he asks, "can rapid social and cultural change, disturbing to many, be rendered acceptable in the context of certain traditions and attitudes which characterize Australian society — easy-going, inward-looking, egalitarian (even allowing for the mythical element), with a well-developed strain of cynicism?" He praises the Garnaut Report for its recommendation that Australia "seek intensive contact with the dynamic societies of North East Asia", but expresses dismay at the narrow and unimaginative "stances of the political parties in the face of these challenges". Australia, he suggests, "has some of the features of a highly educated society" but suffers from virtually tribal "disciplinary protectionism" and a consequent poverty of enlightened generalist discourse. One might go further and suggest that Australia has, as one of its notable features, a highly anti-educational and anti-intellectual general culture, which has infected even its universities. The challenge of cultural revolution in this country is, therefore, even more formidable than Richardson cares to claim. What is certain is that an unrelenting debate on the character of Australia and its capacity to command its own destiny is long overdue. This book is, unfortunately, only a tentative and rather timid contribution to such a debate.

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***Asia and the Major Powers: Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy.* Edited by Robert A. Scalapino, Seizaburo Sato, Jusuf Wanadi and Sung-Joo Han.** Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1988. 395 pp.

The volume under review is a rich collection of fifteen essays on the relationship between the domestic political context of decision-making and