

The State of the Discipline: Australasian Political Science

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Australasia is a term dating from the 18th century and encompassing Australia and New Zealand, although sometimes also including Papua New Guinea and neighbouring islands in the Pacific Ocean. My main focus here will be Australia and New Zealand, although I include a brief account of the development of political science in the Pacific Islands.¹

In the 19th century Australasia attracted the attention of international observers because of its ‘state experiments’, including the use of statutory authorities for provision of infrastructure and wage-fixing, and its electoral reforms, including the Australian ballot, preferential voting, women’s suffrage and Maori seats. In the 20th century international attention was again drawn to state experiments and electoral reforms in the Antipodes, including the ‘abolition’ of the welfare state by a Labour Government in New Zealand in the 1980s and the subsequent electoral reforms to prevent such a radical experiment ever again being undertaken. The invention of ‘femocrats’ in Australia in the 1970s and 80s also attracted attention, but there was now a local political science profession to contribute to such debates.

History

Political science in Australasia (Australia and New Zealand) largely developed in the years after World War 2, although there were spasmodic beginnings from the 19th century, mostly within history and law departments. In the early years the major influence was British and Constitutional law was a major focus, along with narratives of the evolution of British liberties, which fed into civics textbooks.

One significant development before World War 2 was the emergence of the study of public administration, grounded in the Australasian tradition of ‘state experiments’. This was the term used in an authoritative two-volume account published in London in 1902 by William Pember Reeves. As New Zealand Minister of Labour in the Liberal governments of the 1890s Reeves was author of the world’s first compulsory Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act (1894). As appropriate for a ‘social engineer’, he later became Director of the London School of Economics.² While Reeves was New Zealand-born, many visitors also came to study state

¹ My thanks to Bronwyn Haywood (NZPSA) and David Hegarty (PIPSA) for their assistance.

² William Pember Reeves, *State Experiments in Australia and New Zealand*, 2 vols, London, Grant Richards 1902.

innovation in Australasia, including French writer Albert Méтин, who described it as 'Socialism without doctrine'.³ The experiments included the extensive use of statutory authorities or quangos to provide utilities and the use of tripartite bodies to set legally enforceable wages and conditions.

A Department of Public Administration was established at the University of Sydney in 1934, before there was any political science department. The first Australian group of the UK's Royal Institute of Public Administration had been founded in 1928 and others rapidly followed. Their journal, called *Public Administration*, came out from 1939, carried many articles on statutory authorities.⁴ Other public affairs bodies also date from the 1930s, including the Australian Institute of Political Science (1932) and the Australian Institute of International Affairs (1933). Similarly in New Zealand, it was lobbying by the New Zealand Institute of Public Administration that led to the founding of the School of Political Science and Public Administration at Victoria University in 1939 and one of its first roles was to provide a Diploma in Public Administration for rising public servants.

The first distinct political science program in Australia was created in the History Department of the University of Melbourne in 1939 and became a separate department with a chair in 1949. After World War 2 the Australian National University (ANU) was created as a research university with an International Relations Department established in 1949 and a Political Science Department in 1952. At the time of the ANU's founding there was a broad vision of the role of the social sciences in post-war reconstruction. Now, for the first time postgraduate students could do their doctoral research in Australia and for the next 25 years most political science PhDs were undertaken at the ANU. The ANU attracted many international visitors such as David Butler who came for every federal election and Arend Lijphart, who was fascinated by the institutional effects of the adoption of proportional representation for the Australian Senate. The ANU was ranked in the top 20 political science departments in the

³ Albert Méтин, *Le Socialism sans Doctrines*, Paris, Felix Alcan, 1910.

⁴ Joanne Scott and John Wanna, 'Trajectories of public administration and administrative history in Australia: Rectifying a curious blight?', *Public Administration*, 2005; Don Aitkin, 'Political Science in Australia: Development and Situation', in Don Aitkin (ed), *Surveys of Australian Political Science*, Allen & Unwin, 1987, pp. 1-35.

world in 2004, co-equal with Oxford.⁵ The ANU is unlike most Australian universities in having separate political science and international relations departments, although similar to Aberystwyth and the London School of Economics in this respect.

The rapid expansion of Australian universities after 1957 saw the multiplication of politics programs and almost all of Australia's 38 public universities now teach politics. In 2002 the Department of Education recorded 378 academics teaching political science or policy studies.⁶ Australian political science curriculum has tended to follow British precedents and to encourage students to study a few subjects at a relatively advanced level, rather than wide range of subjects, and to follow this up, where appropriate, with an honours and doctoral thesis pursuing subjects at even greater depth. Characteristically doctoral research is by thesis only, without coursework, except for the 'professional doctorates', largely undertaken by public servants.

Shifting paradigms

There have been shifting intellectual influences within Australian political science and a changing external environment has also shaped its development. As noted, Australian political science was at first heavily influenced by the example of eclectic institutionalism taken over from the UK. Much of the early post-war work was in the nature of the mapping of Australian political institutions although there were also some small-scale surveys. From the 1960s the Michigan model of survey research became an important influence and national public opinion and electoral surveys were initiated by Don Aitkin at the ANU.⁷ As in other countries, this 'Americanisation' of Australian political science was assisted by money from the Ford Foundation, provided via the University of Michigan, and Donald Stokes was also brought over to the ANU to advise on the design of the Australian surveys. The first series of book-length studies of Australian elections (the 1975, 1977 and 1980/1983 federal elections) were published by the American Enterprise Institute.

⁵ Simon Hix, 'A global ranking of political science departments', *Political Studies Review*, 2 (3), September 2004, pp. 293–313.

⁶ Department of Education, Science and Technology, *Higher Education Statistics: Full-time and fractional full-time staff in organisational group 0901*.

⁷ Peter McCarthy, 'Practising political science: 50 years of the RSCS political science program', 2001, <<http://polsc.anu.edu.au/goldenjubilee.php>>

Today Ian McAllister of the ANU is Chair of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems project that coordinates the operation of more than 50 national election studies across the world, including the Australian Election Study and the New Zealand Election Study. The Australian Consortium for Social and Political Research Inc (ACSPRI) is based at the ANU and holds annual summer schools in Canberra on quantitative and qualitative methods as well as winter schools in more varied locations. These are attractive for students, given the absence of postgraduate coursework referred to above.

In the 1970s a radical political science emerged, in particular Marxist-informed political economy and neo-Marxist theories of hegemony. New fields were also opening up, including feminist political science, media and politics and Aboriginal and environmental politics.⁸ This was followed in the 1990s by an increased interest in political discourse, particularly influenced by Michel Foucault but also, to a lesser extent by Habermas. Barry Hindess has been the most influential figure in transmitting and developing Foucauldian concepts of concepts of discourse and governmentality.⁹ A generation of young political scientists eager to challenge 'regimes of truth' have applied Foucauldian approaches to a broad range of topics from the regulation of marriage and mental health to industrial relations and public accounting. The increasingly popular study of political communication and political marketing also contributes to the strength of the linguistic turn in Australian political science.

Another new development in the 1990s has been a burgeoning interest in the theory and practice of deliberative democracy, largely inspired by John Dryzek.¹⁰ A number of political scientists have been involved in promoting deliberative forums, including citizens' juries, deliberative polls and consensus conferences as an adjunct to the policy process. Those interested in electoral reform, electoral administration and open and transparent government

⁸ See Michael Crozier, 'Political science' in Brian Galligan and Winsome Roberts (eds) *The Oxford Companion to Australian Politics*, Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 435-8; Patty Renfrow, 'Gender politics' in Ian McAllister et al, *The Cambridge Handbook of Social Sciences in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 305–22.

⁹ See for example Mitchell Dean and Barry Hindess (eds), *Governing Australia: Studies in Contemporary Rationalities of Government*, Cambridge University Press, 1998; Carol Johnson, *Governing Change: Keating to Howard*, API Network, 2000; 2007.

¹⁰ See for example John S Dryzek, *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond: Liberals, Critics, Contestations*, Oxford University Press, 2000.

have looked to the Democratic Audit of Australia, in which many of Australia's most senior political scientists have been involved (<http://democratic.audit.anu.edu.au>).

We have noted the early importance of the field of public administration in Australasia. With the increased influence of private sector models in the 1980s 'public administration' fell out of favour and was replaced by public sector management and by a growing interest in public policy, at both applied and theoretical levels.

There has been relatively little interest among Australian political scientists in mathematical or economic models of democracy. Two well-funded think tanks, however, with connections to similar US bodies, have vigorously promoted and popularised public choice approaches, particularly assumptions concerning the rent-seeking nature of public interest advocacy.¹¹

The external influences on paradigm shifts have been twofold. First, during the 1990s when the federal government failed to supplement university funding to accommodate salary increases, universities became increasingly dependent on revenue from fee-paying overseas students. International students, mainly from within the region, made up around 20 per cent of onshore university students in 2007, the highest proportion in the OECD.¹² Although they are largely concentrated in commerce faculties, there has also been an influence on political science curriculum, particularly at the graduate level. However the internationalising of the curriculum in response to globalisation is not a phenomenon confined to Australia and there is an increased trend for the term international relations or international studies to be added to the name of politics departments. This reflects student demand within a globalised world and staffing formulae tied to student enrolments.

Second, indicators of research quality, on which research funding is increasingly dependent, have been drawn from the natural sciences and emphasise publication in high-impact journals (largely US-based). This has meant a devaluing of 'thick' descriptions and analysis of Australian political institutions or processes in favour of comparative studies or arguments in

¹¹ The two think tanks are the Melbourne-based Institute of Public Affairs dating from 1943 and the Sydney-based Centre for Independent Studies, founded in 1976 after a visit to Australia by Milton Friedman the previous year.

¹² Department of Education, Science and Training, *Selected Higher Education Statistics—Students*, Canberra, 2007.

which Australian material plays only a minor role. Some Australian-based political scientists are now oriented primarily towards a specialist international community of scholars, rather than towards dialogue with their professional colleagues at home or towards informing public debate and understanding. In international relations, for example, this is manifested in a declining interest in Australian foreign policy and an increased orientation towards international theoretical debates, particularly over norms and identities but also within international political economy.¹³ This in turn has meant a turn away from local publishing towards publishing with 'top' international journals and publishing houses (for example, an Australian is now a co-editor of the Cambridge Studies in International Relations).

The overseas orientation exacerbates the more general trend in contemporary political science towards specialisation and arouses concern over fragmentation of the discipline. Despite such trends, the Australian and New Zealand politics stream remains the largest at the annual APSA conferences and considerable debate is generated over local political and policy developments.

Professional organisations

The British inheritance is visible in the preference for the term Political Studies in the names of all three regional political science associations. The decision to form the Australian Political Studies Association was taken in 1951, following a seminar at the ANU to mark the jubilee of federation.¹⁴ The decision was prompted by the establishment of IPSA to which the new Australian association promptly affiliated—although its membership has occasionally lapsed over the years due to cost. The association became the Australasian Political Studies Association in 1964, signalling that it encompassed New Zealand, but in 2007 it controversially decided to end the New Zealand connection and became the Australian Political Studies Association again. The first APSA conference was held in 1957 and they are now held annually and usually attract 200 to 300 participants, depending on location. In April 2008 APSA had 345 members. It does not attract members from some of the growth

¹³ Christian Reus-Smit, 'International Relations', in Ian McAllister et al, *The Cambridge Handbook of Social Sciences in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 358–73.

¹⁴ Geoff Sawyer organised the seminar and political scientists Leicester Webb, Finn Crisp and MacMahon Ball were part of the decision to form APSA, which was duly founded in 1952.

areas in political science, particularly international relations. International relations specialists are far more likely to join the US-based International Studies Association (ISA). In 2004 the first Oceanic Conference on International Studies was held at the ANU, followed by conferences at Melbourne (2006) and Brisbane (2008), by which time a proposal for a new Brisbane-based Asia-Pacific regional division of ISA had been accepted.

We have noted earlier that the professional study of public administration historically preceded the creation of a political studies association in Australia and the Institute of Public Administration Australia still flourishes, along with its journal, now called the *Australian Journal of Public Administration*. Its membership is ten times that of APSA but is largely made up of public servants. Its conferences include a cheaper pre-conference academic day.

APSA does not have specialist groups, apart from its women's caucus, but a number of its members belong to the Public Policy Network (PPN). The PPN emerged from the IPSA Research Committee 27 on the Structure and Organization of Government, in which Australians had been particularly active and which held two conferences in Melbourne in 1988 and 1990.¹⁵ The PPN holds small annual conferences and is now the Australasian Regional Group of IPSA Research Committee 32. In another subfield, there have been largely unsuccessful attempts to synchronise APSA conferences and those of the Australasian Group for the Study of Parliament, which brings together academics and practitioners, including parliamentary research staff. The parliamentary libraries, particularly that of the federal parliament, employ a number of political scientists and produce high quality research materials on electoral matters as well as other political issues.

APSA has a journal, dating from 1966, called *Politics* until 1990 when it became the *Australian Journal of Political Science*, a sign of the increased search for international disciplinary status. In 2007 it ranked 42nd in the ISI Thomson ranking of political science journals. Journals outside APSA remained less affected by this trend, including the *Australian Journal of Politics and History* (dating from 1955) and the *Australasian Parliamentary Review* published by the Australasian Group for the Study of Parliament. The

¹⁵ Subsequent conferences of the IPSA Research Committee were held in Canberra (1996) and Melbourne (2002).

APSA Women's Caucus was founded in 1979 to improve the status of women in the profession and to promote the study of women within political science.¹⁶ It meets annually and since 1981 has sponsored a Women and Politics Prize now awarded biannually. It has conducted iterative surveys of political science curriculum, which suggest that the overall effect of feminist scholarship on the discipline has been additive rather than transformational (unlike cognate social sciences such as history and sociology). The Women's Caucus has a representative on the APSA Executive, as does the Postgraduate Caucus and as did New Zealand. Since the 1990s the APSA convention has been that men and women alternate as APSA President.

The New Zealand Political Studies Association was founded in 1974 and for the last two years has attracted about 150 participants to its conferences although it only has about 50 paid-up members. The Aotearoa/New Zealand Women and Politics Network has produced a newsletter since 1991 with interesting gender analyses of New Zealand politics and with about 120 subscribers including government departments. The women's caucus along with the Maori caucus have representatives on the executive of the New Zealand Political Studies Association. The respected New Zealand journal, *Political Science*, predates the Association and is independent of it, being founded in 1948 by students at Victoria University and still flourishing. As in Australia, British institutional approaches were gradually supplemented by Michigan style survey research and more recently still by an interest in discourse, political communication and postcolonial studies.

The Pacific Islands Political Studies Association (PIPSA) is currently based in the University of the South Pacific in Suva and also has about 50 members. It is notable that unlike the two other regional associations it does have its own Wikipedia entry. PIPSA is over 20 years old, having been initiated from Brigham Young University in Hawaii in 1987 and being housed in both New Zealand and Australia over time. It holds biannual conferences, the last one being in Vila (Vanuatu) in 2007. Funding is provided indirectly by AusAID and New Zealand

¹⁶ Marian Sawyer, 'The impact of feminist scholarship on Australian political science', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 39 (3), 2004, pp. 553–66.

AID¹⁷ to bring delegates to the conferences and to fund publication of conference proceedings. Most political science in the Pacific Islands is closely linked to area studies, but with a recent focus on governance and security issues, as well as more traditional institutional approaches and work on electoral systems and election outcomes,

Conclusions

Australasian political science has grown up over the last 50 years and can readily present its own interpretations of Antipodean experiments, rather than waiting for the verdict of international observers. Nonetheless, something is being lost as political science becomes increasingly specialised and oriented to international communities of scholars rather than towards informing debate at home. There are exceptions— particularly at LaTrobe University, which has at least four political science professors who are also notable public intellectuals. This is becoming less common, however, as the professionalised political science of today leads away from the more generalist concerns and engaged public citizenship.

¹⁷ Through the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project at the ANU and the Pacific Co-operation Foundation respectively.