

***TRUE BELIEVERS — THE STORY OF THE FEDERAL PARLIAMENTARY LABOR PARTY***

edited by John Faulkner & Stuart Macintyre. Allan & Unwin, 2001. xxxii + 328 (incl. index). ISBN 186508 527 8 (pbk) \$A35.00.

***LIBERALISM AND THE AUSTRALIAN FEDERATION***

edited by J.R. Nethercote. Federation Press, 2001. xx + 380 (incl. index). ISBN 1 86287 402 6, RRP \$A44.00.

Reviewed by Joan Rydon\*

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The centenary of federation has stimulated a great deal of publication in Australian history. Both the major political parties were among those who secured grants from the National Council for the Centenary of Federation to produce histories. These two books are the outcome and are valuable additions to Australian history.

The Labor volume was launched during the re-enactment of the first Commonwealth parliament in May 2001; the Liberal came later, at the end of August 2001. Both parties have opted for a collection of articles contributed by well-chosen writers, including academics, journalists and party activists. They have given us excellent accounts of periods or aspects of each party since federation. In the two volumes I have found only one clear factual error. In *Liberalism and the Australian Federation* it is claimed that referendums to increase Commonwealth powers over industry, commerce and essential services were held with the 1925 general election (p. 131), but Appendix 4 makes clear that the referendums were held separately in September 1926 (p. 326).

Yet the books are very different in their scope and production and seem to aim at rather different readerships. *True Believers* is a paperback, with many illustrations and contributor's essays are interspersed with frequent boxed sections emphasising particular events, characters or policies. It is very readable and seems designed to appeal to a wide readership of the party faithful and I understand the first edition sold out quite quickly). It claims merely to be a history of the federal caucus and there is great stress on the early formation of that body and its continuity over 100 years.

This emphasis on continuity is presumably embodied in its title, *True Believers*, but the reader may well ask believers in what? The story of the caucus, like that of most political organisations is one of changing ideas and policies. This book makes no attempt to find a consistency of belief from 1901 to 2001. Though Chifley's 'Light on the Hill' is quoted, there is little mention of socialism or any continuous theory of society. Perhaps Labor parliamentarians are thought to have a true belief in their solidarity as expressed in the pledge and the party's organisation. But it is admitted that 'a party where parliamentarians were required to accept the dual discipline of the Caucus and policies determined by the party rank and file, would inevitably

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encounter tensions in its relationship with its elected parliamentarians' (p. 204). Hence the sad story of three major splits and long periods in opposition before the recognition of factions ends the myth of solidarity.

Yet, if the 'true belief' of caucus members lay in that solidarity, what of the 'rats' to whom a chapter is devoted. Were they ever 'true believers'? We are told that 'rats were part of an enduring tradition' (p. 266). But sometimes they were forgiven. Were Beasley, Rosevear, Ward and other Langites ever 'true believers'? If this phrase refers to a certain theory of democracy the book shows how few Labor leaders accepted it. Much of Evatt's behaviour and sometimes that of Whitlam and Hawke was contrary to the notions underlying Labor solidarity. The Kirribilli agreement cut across the principle that caucus selects its leader.

The chapters on the formation of caucus and its first members are splendid though no emphasis is placed on the inclusion of senators though this was an important factor in the development of Australian bicameralism.

In general little attention is given to the effects of caucus on the development of the constitution or the working of bicameralism. The relation of the caucus to Labor cabinets and with the outside executive and conference of the party is well covered, but caucus is seldom seen as a federal body. Despite Terry Irving's excellent account of the complexities of the 1930s and the occasional reference to the powers of state bodies to pre-select and expel, federal aspects rarely emerge. In his account of the split of 1955, Sean Scalmer does not make clear that the party first split in Victoria. A more consistent account of Labor's attitude to the Constitution and to federalism might have been provided by closer attention to caucus attitudes to referendums to amend the constitution. One of the most useful chapters is Verity Burgmann's 'Critics of Caucus' which covers not only the traditional problems such as those voiced by V.G. Childe, but also the critics of modern Labor and its decreasing working class nature.

John Nethercote was not as restricted as the Labor editors. He was not limited to the history of one parliamentary party. He has produced a very different book. It is a fairly expensive hardback and I doubt that he expects a wide readership. He is not committed to one meaning of 'liberalism', and his contributors often adopt different positions and delight in doing so. The first section of the book is devoted to setting an historical and international context to Australian Liberalism, the second discusses Liberalism and Australia's federal history while the third has four studies of Liberalism in distinct fields of public policy. They form an impressive whole.

This is not a work to please the party faithful, but a collection of serious analyses of non-Labor organisations and their place in our federation. I enjoyed most contributions. In the first section there is an outstanding essay by Gregory Melleuish. He takes true Liberals to be 'those who favour the development of individuality and who are opposed to the extension of state powers'. He faces the problem of Australian development of the use of 'liberal' to describe both Freetraders in New South Wales and Protectionists in Victoria. He asserts that neither Syme nor Deakin

were really Liberals. He sees Deakin's Liberalism as a combination of 'statism, populism and conservatism'. He thinks there is a current revival of liberalism, but is worried that it is accompanied by conservative populism in the form of Hansonism. He believes that the real theorists of Australian liberalism were Bruce Smith and B.R. Wise and adds Shann, Eggleston and Professor John Anderson as later examples.

In his chapter entitled 'A Liberal Federation and a Liberal Constitution', Greg Craven gives almost unqualified praise to the Commonwealth Constitution and the 'liberal conservatism' of its founders. He expresses the hope that the same 'liberal conservatism' may be successful in devising a republic that reflects our existing outstanding constitutional democracy.

A series of chapters discusses Liberalism in each of the main periods of federation. Throughout we see the continuing battles between Protectionism and Free Trade; the problems of Liberal Governments formed with Labor dissidents, with organised farmers and with the support of large organised pressure groups and of independent think tanks. It is clear that while non-Labor parties have been more successful than the ALP in winning control of the Commonwealth Parliament, they can rarely be described as clearly 'liberal' in attitudes or policies. But the qualifications and the problems are well analysed until Andrew Norton considers the prospects of a new Australian settlement which would replace that developed by Deakin and accepted for most of the hundred years of federal politics.

The four chapters on Liberalism and Public Policy are of a uniformly high standard and provocatively argued. I particularly enjoyed Campbell Sharman on Federalism and Carl Bridge on Foreign Relations. In the earlier sections it is good to find a chapter devoted to Deakin's relations with the Australian Women's National League whose tremendous importance in the story of Liberalism is often overlooked.

In reflecting on the two books as wholes, I considered whether together they provided a reasonable history of Australian federalism. I think they do, in a rough sort of way, by tracing the main achievements of successive parliaments and governments. But it would be unfair to expect them to present much on the interaction of the parties and the consequent effects on the institutions established by the Constitution. In discussing the first decade of federation, essentially the period of three parties, Ian Marsh has contributed a masterly account of interaction between the parties and these institutions to the Liberalism book. In later periods I would have liked more attention to be given to the relation of Liberal and Country (National) parties. This would involve more attention to methods of pre-selection and to electoral systems, in which the interaction of parties is most conspicuous. Any outside observer of Australian federal politics is likely to see complex electoral systems as one of its distinguishing features, but in the index of these two books there is not a single reference to compulsory voting, preferential voting or proportional representation. ▲