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Politics, Society, Self

by Geoff Gallop. UWA Publishing, 2012, viii + 325 pp, RRP \$29.95

What is to be Done?: The struggle for the soul of the labour movement

by Jim Macken. The Federation Press, 2012, x + 69 pp, RRP \$16.95

There is, sadly, no established tradition in Australia of those involved in politics writing seriously about the subject. In the UK, by contrast, practitioners have made notable contributions: historians like Churchill, diarists like Harold Macmillan and Dick Crossman, theorists such as Tony Crosland and polymaths like Roy Jenkins, who throughout his career produced a steady flow of quality history, memoirs and essays. There are some indications that this may be changing with the publication of Bob Carr's diaries, John Howard's best selling memoirs and important books by Rodney Cavalier and Frank Sartor. These two works by labour movement figures are also an encouraging sign.

Geoff Gallop's *Politics, Society, Self* is a collection of speeches and occasional writings. Such volumes can vary greatly in quality, from the disconnected outpourings of those who are convinced that every word they write should be immortalised in print to collections that fit together so well they seem purpose-written, for example, John Hirst's *Sense and Nonsense in Australian History*. Gallop's book is more in the latter category, containing lucid, intelligent and thought-provoking essays about politics and religion, the future of parties and governments, 'left liberalism', social policy, post-New Public Management public administration, federalism, human rights and mental health. He tries to make sense of and provide some solutions to the problems and crises that beset the modern state. Gallop is well qualified to do so, having been an academic, practitioner of politics, Premier of WA, and having successfully battled personal problems. His writing combines theoretical rigour with practical insight.

While forthright about his views, Gallop is a voice of reason in a climate of increasingly extreme public debate. Influenced by Bernard Crick, he defends politics as the process by which:

...we peacefully resolve conflict. It's all about negotiation and compromise and, in a democracy, it is underpinned by civil and political liberty and regular elections. It is a messy business that allows for the expression and management of interests. Consensus is never assumed but is an objective towards which politicians need to direct their efforts.

Gallop's causes are the much maligned 'Third Way' of Tony Blair (a personal friend), the tempering of economic rationalism by social inclusion, a 'new radical centre', a charter of rights and a republic. He also champions parliament, states' rights, action on climate change and sustainability. If there is a weakness in his prescriptions, it is a tendency towards broad, high-minded generalisations that are light on practical details about implementation.

Unfortunately, this worthwhile volume has not received the quality of presentation it deserves. The cover is drab and the pages already yellowing. While the economics of publishing are undoubtedly difficult, better editing would have removed unnecessary repetition and made the work flow more smoothly. Proper proofing should have eliminated the sloppy typos that mar the book. Most egregiously, readers would be surprised to learn on page 47 that Gough Whitlam 'challenged his colleagues' to take up the cause of 'pubic policy'.

The current travails of the Labor Party have had the side effect of producing some interesting writing. Jim Macken has had a long involvement with the labour movement as a unionist, ALP Industrial Group activist, barrister and Judge of the Industrial Commission. Macken has produced a fiery, opinionated tract in the tradition of pioneering Labor publicists such as George Black and Henry Boote. Macken's characterisation of labour history as a selfless struggle by a rank and file-controlled mass movement to better the lot of the 'poor and marginalised' relates to reality the way Robin Hood does to English history. It is the Australian version of the Whig theory of history, although not as subtly or elegantly expressed as by Bede Nairn. That being said, both Robin Hood and 'the light on the hill' are influential and beneficial myths, the latter being an infinitely preferable world view to the sordid cynicism of many current labour movement operatives. Macken describes their mindset as 'an eerie mix of pantheism and epicureanism with the words best understood being ME ... NOW ... MORE'.

Macken traces the difficulties of the labour movement to the 'cultural revolution' of the 1960s with its 'lurch to nihilism' and 'accompanying threads of moral decay and social collapse'. At the same time, industry and commerce changed with the rise of multinational corporations: 'The new God was to be the market: a cruel and inhuman sovereign'. The Whitlam Government 'reflected the ethos of the cultural revolution rather than that of a traditional Labor Government'. The support of the 'unionised, blue collar work force' was taken for granted while the Government courted 'the middle class and radical women's vote'. Hawke and Keating adopted 'ultra-conservative' economic policies that led to:

...the casualisation of the labour force, the mushrooming of temporary employment agencies, a reduction in the real wages of most workers, a progressive loss of long established working conditions, a widening gulf between rich and poor and the disenchantment of the rank and file and middle level union management from union policy decisions.

Unions ignored the threat these developments posed and ‘persisted in pursuing structures and attitudes that were no longer relevant’. The unions and the ALP ‘abandoned the principle of rank and file control. Both thought the centralisation of power would solve the organisational problems they faced’. By the 21st century, they were shrinking, unrepresentative organisations controlled by cliques of careerists.

In spite of his romanticising of the past, Macken does not advocate a simplistic reversion to previous structures as the way forward for the labour movement. He argues two basic changes are needed if the unions are to survive and revive. First, the definition of ‘worker’ needs to be greatly widened: workers of whatever class should be able to become unionists. This could be achieved by peak union bodies issuing for a nominal sum a ‘universal OK card’ that would bring any worker under the umbrella of the labour movement. Second, instead of restricting union membership to employees, a ‘small and shrinking class’, any ‘collective of workers’ should be ‘recognised as a trade union and welcomed into the union fold’. The union movement should no longer be affiliated with the ALP as the two bodies’ interests are often far from identical. Instead, a broadened union membership would exercise influence in the Labor Party by voting in primaries. The ALP also needs to democratise and broaden its base: ‘Would it really matter if we had gay branches of the Party? Would it matter if the MUA members on a vessel formed an ALP branch or the workers in a western suburbs factory did so?’ It is doubtful if Macken’s innovative ideas will ever be given a chance as it would involve the current controllers of the labour movement voluntarily yielding their fiefdoms.

Gallop and Macken are dissimilar types of Labor people from disparate eras who have written different kinds of book. Yet both have in common a dedication to their cause and stimulating ideas about how to save it. If the unions and ALP are to be a continuing force in society, such input is much needed. ▲