
Power, Politics and Parliament: Essays in Honour of John R Nethercote, edited by Henry Ergas and Jonathan Pincus. Connor Court Publishing, 2022, pp 412. RRP \$36.99, ISBN: 9781922815163.

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This edited collection – a *festschrift* in honour of the late John Nethercote⁶ - comprises a challenging mix of celebrations of the lives and contributions of significant figures in Australian politics and public administration, as well as a multi-faceted call to preserve the processes, practices and principles of good government and the Westminster tradition championed by Nethercote and his many mentors and mentees within the Australian political landscape.

The volume honours the life and work of Nethercote, an intellectual, experienced public servant, indefatigable editor and compiler, and generous mentor to many engaged in the study of politics and public administration in Australia. His admirers include former Prime Minister John Howard, who wrote the Foreword to the book. Nethercote's personal character and professional contribution are celebrated with gratitude and admiration,⁷ made even more poignant by his death in May 2022 just prior to the finalisation of the collection.⁸

⁶ Henry Ergas & Jonathan Pincus 'Editor's Preface' in Henry Ergas & Jonathan Pincus (eds), *Power, Politics & Parliament*. Redland Bay: Connor Court Publishing, 2022.

⁷ See eg. John Howard, 'Forward', pp. xi; Luke Malpas, 'Nethers – the Person' pp. 4-24; 'Curriculum Vitae of John R Nethercote', pp. 397-403. In Ergas & Pincus, *Power, Politics & Parliament*.

⁸ See eg. John Howard, 'Forward', pp. xi; Luke Malpas, 'Nethers – the Person' pp. 4-24; 'Curriculum Vitae of John R Nethercote', pp. 397-403. In Ergas & Pincus, *Power, Politics & Parliament*.

Nethercote's expertise spanned a range of fields: government and public administration, parliament, public policy, comparative politics, political history, biography, federalism, constitutional, public and administrative law, economics, and industrial relations. Importantly for readers of this publication, Nethercote was also an editor of *Australasian Parliamentary Review* (2001-2003) and founder and long serving editor of the *Canberra Bulletin of Public Administration* which is warmly described in this volume. One of Nethercote's strengths was that he combined the experience of the practitioner with the discernment of the scholar.

Nethercote's diverse and prolific achievements over many decades are documented in Part 5 of the volume. His diligent commitment to supporting the careers of the next generation of public servants is thoughtfully acknowledged in contributions from Glyn Davis,⁹ Luke Malpas¹⁰ and Angela Adams.¹¹

The collection also includes an outstanding contribution from Nethercote himself, 'Canberra Knights',¹² that documents the rise and fall of public service mandarins during period 1936 to 1986. In this chapter Nethercote describes a number of key characters in what was then known as the First Division of the public service. These include Sir Roland Wilson, Dr HC 'Nugget' Coombs, Sir Kenneth Bailey and Sir Frederick Wheeler. Nethercote describes how these men shaped and responded to the government's policy agenda, bringing both fierce intellect and trusted political intuition to their offices. They created an environment where contested theories on economic management, executive accountability and social policy could be debated among public servants and politicians on equal terms. The expertise of these public servants was respected and admired not only by their juniors but also by their political masters, and often, by politicians 'across the aisle' as well. Nethercote describes these characters as formidable presences during the period from Curtin to Fraser - not just able to reach the highest levels of bureaucratic influence, but also to join the knightly ranks of an order of chivalry:

⁹ Glyn Davis, 'Aphorisms and Bow Ties', p. 1. Ergas & Pincus, *Power, Politics & Parliament*.

¹⁰ Luke Malpas, 'Nethers – the Person', p. 4. Ergas & Pincus, *Power, Politics & Parliament*.

¹¹ Jill Adams, 'The Canberra Bulletin of Public Administration', p. 24. Ergas & Pincus, *Power, Politics & Parliament*.

¹² John R Nethercote, 'Canberra Knights' pp. 281-309 in Ergas & Pincus, *Power, Politics & Parliament*.

Canberra was not a Camelot but the Canberra Knights had some similarities with the Knights of the Round Table. They informally had a code of behaviour for they saw themselves not as clerks but very much as professional doctors and lawyers, and certainly as engineers. The essence of the code was political impartiality; ethical conduct; frank and fearless advice to ministers based on intensive and exacting analysis; due process administration based on law; and what amounted to frugality in deployment of public funds.¹³

In many ways this description matches what the contributing authors to this volume consider to be essential characteristics of the public service that may be under threat in the modern age.

Nethercote – and many other authors contributing to this volume including David Lee¹⁴ and Paul Kelly¹⁵ – are clearly attracted to leaders such as Sir Robert Menzies, who embody the values Nethercote eloquently attributes to the ‘Canberra Knights’. At their best, they are able to match political philosophy and conviction with professional implementation, with a sharp eye to ensuring practical outputs and minimal waste.

These values and attributes are particularly well documented and explored in Part 4 of the book which has a focus on political history¹⁶ and explores the life and work of many important figures in Australian public life - including John Curtin,¹⁷ William McMahon,¹⁸

¹³ John R Nethercote, ‘Canberra Knights’ p. 303.

¹⁴ David Lee ‘S. M. Bruce and R. G. Menzies compared’ p. 317.

¹⁵ Paul Kelly ‘In Search of Robert Menzies’ p. 334.

¹⁶ See e.g. Tom Frame, ‘Australian Political Biography and Psychohistory’, p. 347 in Ergas & Pincus, *Power, Politics & Parliament*.

¹⁷ John Edwards ‘Curtin 1942, Morrison 2018 – two declarations on Australia’s national interests’ p. 326 in Ergas & Pincus, *Power, Politics & Parliament*.

¹⁸ Patrick Mullins, ‘The Full Set: Writing the Life of Williams McMahon’ p. 359 in Ergas & Pincus, *Power, Politics & Parliament*.

Sir Arthur Tange,¹⁹ Sir James Plimsoll,²⁰ and Mary Gaudron²¹ - through the discerning lens of Nethercote's biographical work. Each of these figures pursued convictions orientated around public service. The portraits are appositely interrogated and evaluated by the contributing authors, with the practical and prudent authority Nethercote himself demonstrated in his published works and editorial positions.

Part 2 of the volume contains a collection of insights on the same themes, but with a more explicit focus on philosophy and ethics, often from the perspective of veterans of the public service, such as Meredith Edwards²² and Gary Banks,²³ and giants of the commentariat, such as Henry Ergas.²⁴ Loren Lomasky²⁵ offers an insightful account on the theme of 'the eclipse of *laissez-faire* utilitarianism' and what this means for contemporary liberalism in social democracies like Australia. Peter Kurti's offering also warrants close consideration and explores the role of religion and 'the ethics of citizenship'²⁶ in a secular society. When taken together, these contributions remind us of the highly integrated, complex relationship between the institutional identity of the Australian public service and the individual character and attributes of those occupying the position of public officer. These contributors remind us that the integrity, expertise, professionalism and experience of our public servants, coupled with the legal and philosophical frameworks which govern and limit their powers and discretion, both shape and reflect governance and government in Australia.

Part 3 of the book has a focus on parliament, public service and administration. It includes a contribution from David Clune on the NSW Legislative Council, which he insightfully describes as a 'progressive conservative institution' that holds an important

¹⁹ Peter Edwards, 'The Biography of a Mandarin: Writing about Sir Arthur Tange', p. 369 in Ergas & Pincus, *Power, Politics & Parliament*.

²⁰ Jeremy Hearder, 'Writing the biography of a diplomat: Sir James Plimsoll', p. 378 in Ergas & Pincus, *Power, Politics & Parliament*.

²¹ Pam Burton, 'Gaudron's Law: A tool for change' p. 387 in Ergas & Pincus, *Power, Politics & Parliament*.

²² Meredith Edwards, 'The Public Policy Process in Australia: reflections from practice' pp. 92-116 in Ergas & Pincus, *Power, Politics & Parliament*.

²³ Gary Banks, 'Ethics and the Statutory Officer' pp. 67-92 in Ergas & Pincus, *Power, Politics & Parliament*.

²⁴ Henry Ergas, 'Can Columnists be Civilized?' pp. 160-184 in Ergas & Pincus, *Power, Politics & Parliament*.

²⁵ Loren Lomasky, 'The Eclipse of Laissez Faire Utilitarianism' pp. 116-140 in Ergas & Pincus, *Power, Politics & Parliament*.

²⁶ Peter Kurti, 'Religion and the ethics of citizenship in a secular society' pp. 140-160 in Ergas & Pincus, *Power, Politics & Parliament*.

place in the broader fabric of parliamentary government in Australia.²⁷ Richard French writes about ‘speaking truth to power’ and the strategic limitations of employing such an approach when engaging with Ministers in the policy development process.²⁸ French instead favours an approach which draws upon the qualities and mannerisms elucidated by Nethercote in his rich body of work in this field, also endorsed by Don Hunn, John R Martin and Elizabeth McLeay in their reflections on the New Zealand public service.²⁹ William Coleman writes about the independent expert as ‘arbiter’ within the Australian policy making landscape,³⁰ also acknowledging and engaging with the attributes identified by Nethercote as essential to ensuring robust, independent public policy advice and practical, incremental policy reform.

Power, Politics and Parliament honours the past. It is a reflective collection of lessons learnt and characters analysed. Its many retrospective and biographical chapters present an image of Australian political life and public administration that exists in sharp contrast to the chaos, distrust and disrepute often associated with modern Australian politics and policy. However, this collection also offers important insights for those currently involved in public administration or parliamentary practice. It documents and celebrates the foundational values that underpin the Australian public service and safeguard those working ‘behind the scenes’ in Australia’s modern democratic institutions.

Many contributions to this collection underscore the importance of incremental reform of public institutions, the value of academic expertise, and the need for patience and reflection when it comes to the development of public policy. Many parts of the book explicitly or implicitly eschew rapid, populist or reactionary approaches to policy reform and public administration. This makes this collection a sometimes challenging but important read.

²⁷ David Clune, ‘The NSW Legislative Council: a progressive conservative institution’ pp. 185-206 in Ergas & Pincus, *Power, Politics & Parliament*.

²⁸ Richard French, ‘Speaking Truth to Power is No Way to Speak to a Minister’ pp. 206-223 in Ergas & Pincus, *Power, Politics & Parliament*.

²⁹ Don Hunn, John R Martin & Elizabeth McLeay, ‘The New Zealand Public Service: reflections on the past century’ pp. 223-255 in Ergas & Pincus, *Power, Politics & Parliament*.

³⁰ William Coleman, ‘The Independent Expert as Arbiter’ pp. 255-281 in Ergas & Pincus, *Power, Politics & Parliament*.

This impressive collection of work has been edited by two of Australians most respected scholars and commentators – Henry Ergas and Jonathan Pincus. It gives us a challenging insight into the characters, qualities and values that have shaped public administration and political life in Australia. It is a volume that will be of great interest to readers of this journal and to those working inside or alongside parliaments in the Australasian region as it explicitly interrogates the intersection between power, politics and public service. It also examines whether and how we achieve the high standards Nethercote advocated when it came to serving the public interest in Australia. It is a collection that provides us with examples of the good, bad and ugly. And most compellingly, it inspires us through the example of Nethercote’s devotion to probity and frank and fearless advice.