

A Reflective Rarity in the Bearpit

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Bob Carr

Thoughtlines: Reflections of a Public Man

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AS W.H. AUDEN observed more than forty years ago: 'To the man-in-the-street, who, I'm sorry to say, / Is a keen observer of life, / The word 'Intellectual' suggests straight away / A man who's untrue to his wife.' Perhaps such popular attitudes explain why intellectuals as politicians are rare in the bearpit of modern Australian parliaments, and why they have left little imprint on the politics, as distinct from the culture, of their times. Think of the inconsequential passage of Peter Coleman through two legislatures; or the lightweight political impact of that intellectual heavyweight, Barry Jones. Paul Hasluck is perhaps the exception, although the man himself would not agree, seeing himself as 'an indifferent politician'. There is always Gough Whitlam, but Gough, of course, is *sui generis*.

Bob Carr, too, is an exception. Provocative in his disdain for competitive sport and in his passion for things intellectual and cultural, he is a formidably successful politician. Should he win his next election — and the prospects appear favourable — and serve out his term, he will be the longest-serving premier in the history of New South Wales, eclipsing the record of Sir Henry Parkes.

Thoughtlines is a pot-pourri, with some of the characteristics of the curate's egg. There are speeches — in and out of parliament — book reviews, newspaper articles and extracts from his political diaries. There are even chapters from a political *roman à clef* in which a Carr lookalike begins his comic climb up the greasy pole. I must, however, declare a conflict of interest: the diary extracts occur in a generous review of my own *A Cabinet Diary*. However, as the review reads more like a pre-publication blurb for Carr's much more indiscreet and uninhibited diaries, I feel the conflict is minimal.

The diversity of Carr's interests is extraordinarily wide: a sample ranges from the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius through Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, to a cringe-inducing welcome for Margaret Thatcher — 'when it comes to royalty lay it on with a trowel'. There is praise for that shallow if most charismatic of American presidents, William Jefferson Clinton, though here the words are attributed to the speechwriter, Graham Freudenberg; and a celebration of bushwalking in the Blue Mountains, among other places.

Three main elements dominate the book: American politics, particularly presidential history; aspects of the Australian Labor Party story; and contemporary political issues. The emphasis on history is not surprising, for Carr is 'a history tragic' — no doubt more admirable than 'a cricket tragic' — and two long essays lament the decline of his favourite subject — 'more powerful than literature or philosophy' — in our schools and universities. Carr's is a passionate plea for 'the science of knowing where we've been ... [for] all aspects of the unending quest to understand the human condition, for which history provides the indispensable chart'.



Carr writes with great assurance on the USA. An effective defence of Thomas Jefferson against latter-day revisionists is studded with comparative references to a dozen other presidents. He provides a modest account of one of them, Franklin Pierce, for whom there is much to be modest about, and he confesses he is too generous to Nixon. He jokes easily with Gore Vidal on his fictional fantasy of resurrected presidents, *The Smithsonian Institution*, and is impressed by a book that challenges the hegemonic images of American modernity.

His writing on Australian history is more engaged, focusing mainly on the ALP: its heroes, triumphs and dissensions. Here chapters from his 'always unfinished and never-to-be-published novel', *Titanic Forces*, do much to illuminate the history of the New South Wales ALP in the 1970s. In these, his alter ego, the young apparatchik Richard Carter, fumbles his way upwards among real-life characters — Paul Keating, Bob Gould — and thinly disguised caricatures of well-known figures — Spats McCredie (Jim McClelland), John Stone (John Ducker), Greg Sheridan (Graham Richardson). One chapter, 'Getting Hegerty', in which young Richard attends a branch meeting in pursuit of votes to oust the sitting member, 'the mentally challenged' Hegerty, is a comic gem, instantly recognisable to all who have attended such gatherings.

His views on a range of contemporary social issues — the legalisation of heroin, depression, euthanasia — are on display, and there is a surprisingly passionate outburst against the ‘industrial infamy’ of the Howard–Reith attempt to destroy the Australian Maritime Union. But his two major contemporary preoccupations in this collection are the environment and Aborigines. On the population explosion, he is, despite his disclaimer, apocalyptic; on feral animals he is ferocious (not the chapter headed ‘Good Evening, Reptiles’ — there he’s addressing journalists); and on carbon trading he is enthusiastic. In three speeches on dis-possession, the stolen generations and reconciliation, Carr is understanding and responsive, a provincial premier putting to shame our present national governors.

What sort of intellectual emerges from these essays? Certainly no adventurous thinker intoxicated by high-flown ideas. This is a sober, contemplative, conservative figure. Well before it was fashionable, he had jettisoned the ALP’s socialist objective as ‘about as relevant ... as an Egyptian hieroglyphic’. While he confesses to having been ‘a teenage Whitlamite’, and despite a deep affection for his contemporary Paul Keating, his political heroes are not Labor’s men of vision. His admiration is for the practical, non-abrasive moderates: Bill McKell, ‘maestro of the possible’ who laid the foundations of Labor’s hegemony in New South Wales; Ben Chifley, ‘pragmatist’; Neville Wran; and Bob Hawke. All these, of course, with the possible exception of Chifley, were outstandingly successful political leaders — ‘Balmain boys don’t lose’ — and, in acknowledging the success of the Wran style — ‘a brand of populism at the provincial level’ — Carr perhaps identifies his own political approach.

But it is not just in relation to the ALP that his conservatism is apparent. It is never difficult to identify what he is against: the legalisation of heroin (‘ignores the tendency of well-meaning reforms to go wrong’); the legalisation of euthanasia (‘not possible to codify in a law the safeguards, the circumstances, in which the extinguishing of a human life would be possible’); any significant expansion of the Australian population (‘would mean the intensive urbanisation of eastern Australia ... between the Great Dividing Range and the sea’). And, again, despite his fascination with the US presidency and US presidents, he is the most minimalist of republicans — no popularly elected president for Carr. And, despite the USA being the exemplar of a nation with a written bill of rights, Carr is against the introduction of such a statute in Australia. In a conservative age, he is a humane, tolerant and balanced conservative. Many chapters celebrate the civilisation achieved by European Australians in the little over two hundred years that they have occupied this continent; yet Carr is always aware of the tragic cost of these achievements to the original inhabitants.

For a politician in mid-life, this is a brave book. In an age in which the bully-boy populists of the right have made élites and élitism terms of abuse, Carr’s book is a courageous reaffirmation of the enduring values of high culture and the things of the mind.

Paul Keating
(from *True Believers*, edited by John Faulkner
and Stuart Macintyre)