

A Lifetime of Beginning with the Facts

In Gilbert and Sullivan's *Iolanthe*, Private Willis, a Grenadier guarding the House of Commons, offers a reflective song about partisan choice, whose words would later find their way into many books about politics:

I often think it's comical
How Nature always does contrive
That every boy and every gal
That's born into the world alive
Is either a little Liberal
Or else a little Conservative!

Willis describes himself as “an intellectual chap”, and from time to time I follow his example. I do puzzle over things, especially the behaviour of human beings, and their politics. I used to think Willis was generally right. I now think that he was wrong about me, at least. I seem to have been both a liberal and a conservative at much the same time for much of my life. By “liberal” I mean someone who feels that all human beings are of equal value, and need to feel free and able to develop in their own way, while respecting the need for others to do the same. By “conservative” I mean someone who wants to hang on to what has evolved in human society that appears sound, worth preserving and generally accepted. In no way do I want to go back to any earlier period when things are said to be much better. On the evidence, Australia is a much better place for everyone than was the case fifty, let alone a hundred, years ago.

I have always been curious, too, and as is common I grew more curious with age, more interested in how I came to be the person I am, an experience that is part-explanation for this essay. How did my worldview develop?

The place of parents

Political socialisation texts put great emphasis on the formative effect of parents on the political outlook of their children. In my case the direct

effect was tiny. My parents never talked about politics at the dinner table, and the closest they got, at least in my memory, was talking about the New Education Fellowship, the “progressive” movement in education founded by Beatrice Ensor that flourished for a while in Australia before and after the Second World War. They were themselves the second children of nominally Protestant semi-skilled workers of English and Scottish extraction. My father's father was an underground miner and later a small shop-keeper (briefly a bookie) in Broken Hill; my mother's father was a blacksmith on the New South Wales government railways. My parents both attended Sydney University in the 1920s on teaching scholarships, which meant they had completed high school and done well there. New South Wales, even by the 1920s, had a number of publicly-funded secondary schools in suburbs and country towns. Without those free secondary schools, and their own hard work, my parents would have had to leave school at fifteen.

They married in 1931, and had three sons, all of whom became academics. What they almost drilled into their boys—through narrative, not instruction—were the importance of education, the importance of doing well in it, and the evils of unemployment and the depression. My mother's young brother was said to have been New South Wales Apprentice of the Year in 1931, or to have achieved some similar distinction in the trades area, but he did not have regular work until the war began. That little story came up again and again. From stories like that one, and others about the poverty of their families when they were children, one could infer important values. Depressions were bad. Poverty was bad. Doing well at school was good. White collars fitted more securely than blue collars. To own your own house, really own it, was most important. Hire purchase, going into debt, taking out loans—all were bad. It was not until my father had died, and I was reading his hand-written memoir, that I discovered that he had bought his first car on hire purchase.

Parents affect you more by example than by

instruction, I think. Mine were co-operative hard workers, non-drinkers until they went overseas in their fifties and discovered good food and wine, non-smokers, productive gardeners, and thrifty, determined recyclers. Mum made some and mended all our clothes, turned collars, darned socks; Dad straightened nails, re-soled shoes and maintained our Austin Six. He would get up at dawn and write mathematics textbooks for secondary schools, which he and his co-author had printed, and then posted to the schools that ordered the books. That extra income was useful, and while as a boy I hardly realised its importance, the example was a powerful one, because he did that work on the dining table outside my bedroom.

Education

My parents encouraged reading, and my primary school in Canberra had a good library. There wasn't much Biggles there (I obtained the many works of W.E. Johns as birthday and Christmas presents, through swapping, and through enrolling at the big library), but the school had scads of G.A. Henty, and I read every novel of his that was there. Henty's message (it was the same for Johns, and for John Buchan, the next author whose books were fascinating to me) was straightforward: the British Empire was good, the British were stout chaps, and foreigners were unreliable, if not downright objectionable. We had two encyclopaedias, and I would dip into them almost at random, if there were no other book available. In high school I read everything I could about Australia, all of Ion Idriess, *What Bird is That?*, *The Wonders of the Great Barrier Reef*, and *Come In Spinner*, whose principal author, Dymphna Cusack, had been at Sydney University with my mother. At the library I came across a book about the Bolsheviks' secret police, the Cheka, the predecessor of the OGPU, the NKVD, the MVD and the KGB. Russia seemed to be about secret police and summary executions. Further reading disclosed that my birth year, 1937, was the year of Stalin's Great Purge. And the language of the Cold War hardly helped to balance this construction. The Soviet Union and its satellites were the baddies; we were the goodies.

In 1950 my father became the head of mathematics at Armidale Teachers College and most of my secondary education took place at Armidale High School, an academically strong secondary school used as a test-bed for practice teachers. There was not a teacher I had in my four years there who was other than competent and apparently devoted to his or her subject. The town had a strong Catholic-Protestant divide, which I encountered on my first

day there, when a boy of my own age emerged from behind a tree in Central Park and demanded that I recite the Lord's Prayer. When I hesitated, he called me a "Proddy Dog" and punched me before running away. I had no idea what a Proddy Dog was, but my mother spoke darkly about the Roman Church. Many years later I learned that a priest had visited her family home in Auburn to complain to her parents that she was imperilling the soul of a Catholic boy at Sydney University. Her father apparently suggested that he leave quickly.

Armidale was also the heartland of what was then the Country Party, and the local press and radio station were strongly pro-Coalition. It was not long before I came to understand that people in the country were underprivileged. One could see the deficit in the fact that Armidale then had few street trees, a lamentable water supply and a lot of unpaved streets. It was plainly poorer in municipal quality than the ordered, well-maintained Canberra we had left. Visits to our relatives in Sydney, with its public transport systems, kerbs and gutters, and air of wealth, especially in the city centre, could only reinforce that impression. There had to be a reason, and I learned that while country people created all the wealth, they received little of it back. I added country people to my list of underdogs, which until then consisted of workers and miners. The liberal in me was for underdogs; the nascent conservative accepted the pattern of Australian society as I saw it. Underdogs could be like everyone else if they were given a chance. Indeed, this was one of the consistent underlying messages delivered in our high school.

Armidale was not all Coalition and Country Party. J.S. Moyes, the Anglican Bishop (the town was the episcopal centre of both the Church of England and the Catholic Church) spoke out against the Menzies government's bill to outlaw the Communist Party, which caused a considerable stir in the community and was spoken of at the dinner table. I still have no idea how my parents voted at the subsequent referendum, and therefore whether or not they voted the same way. My father was a strong supporter of the Teachers Federation, the alternative government of the Department of Education. But he was not a union official or committee member, and did not attend meetings.

With high school over I followed the path of my parents in securing a teaching scholarship to take me to the local university, the University of New England, where I would prepare to be a teacher of English and History, by now my best two subjects. The Teachers College adviser more or less told me what other subjects to undertake—Psychology would do me no harm, but Economics and Economic

History were good side-bets. I did what I was told, and in any case, they all sounded interesting.

Student politics was a mystery to me as a fresher, and was not much more sensible as I became more senior. UNE was tiny. My first year in 1954 had only fifty-five students, all of them in Arts and Science. We first-years, all gowned, were asked to stand at the graduation ceremony, shortly after the beginning of term. The Vice-Chancellor addressed us sternly. "Look at the one on your left. Look at the one on your right. One of you will fail!" He was right, too. One-third of our first-year group did fail.

The university would grow quickly, and add new faculties, but in my first years there religion, not politics, was the main divider for students. The Evangelical Union was for serious Protestants, though I can't remember any of its members being outspokenly evangelical. The Student Christian Movement was more social, and seemed to have the prettier girls, while the Newman Society catered to the Catholic faithful. The rest of us, only just a majority I would think, were tepidly Christian. We had a visit from an evangelical Anglican pastor, the Rev. Canon Bryan Greene, and I walked away from one of his sessions recognising that whatever Christianity was, it didn't seem to be for me. Nor could I accept that one could not live a good life unless one believed in Jesus Christ the Saviour. I thought my life had meaning, though I wasn't sure what it was; perhaps I would find out. I decided that I did not know whether or not there was a god, but if there were, he would contact me. I became, and have remained, an agnostic. Atheism I thought over-certain: on what basis could anyone be sure that no god existed?

Two aspects of university life drew me into politics. One was national service in the Army, which made me confront the hot war that had just finished in Korea, and the Cold War that would last for another thirty-five years. The Sydney University Regiment, to which we gravitated after basic training (UNE students formed the New England Company), was referred to as "Russia's secret weapon", not because of our politics, but because of our supposed incompetence in things military. Our manoeuvres outside Singleton, where we trained, were against an evil force called "the Genghistani". The Army had another effect on me. Anxious to leave military service with some kind of skill, I volunteered for a cooking course, did well in it, and was

quickly promoted to the august level of sergeant, where I ran a kitchen that served 1500 meals a day. That was an important task, and I relished the challenge. The army experience developed in me an outlook on social responsibility that would persist: if you have a duty of care for others, your task is to discharge it well and to improve whatever it is, so that you hand it on, improved under your watch, to someone else.

The second political influence in my university life was becoming editor of the student newspaper, *Neucleus*. I need to make clear that my main interests at university at this time were editing the paper and being the musical director of university revues. Study took a subordinate place for some time, which showed in my results. The editor of any student newspaper was instantly involved in the politics of the National Union of Australian University Students (NUAUS), because NUAUS and its factions sent material to the editor, which he could use to fill vacant spaces. What should I print? I had no idea, but learned quickly that student politics was a tiny part of the battle between the USSR and the West. The International Union of Students (IUS) was seen to be dominated by the Soviet Union, and Australia seemed to prefer the International Student Conference (ISC), which was seen to be dominated by the US. Those global forces battled out their views inside the NUAUS. What went on was

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equally heady and impenetrable. UNE students, nearly all of them from the country, had little conception of the international politics that involved students in other countries. I went to no NUAUS conferences—that was the task of the President of the Students' Representative Council. But I had a go at outlining what I thought the issues were; I doubt that many of my fellow students read what I wrote. I added a contemporary codicil to the history I was studying: the world I lived in was just as complicated—perhaps even more complicated—than the world of history.

The study of history, my first love, had already taught me a lot about the problems of finding out and the problems of knowing. Each lecturer enjoined us to go past the books to the journal articles, and if we could to go past the journal articles to the "original sources". Someone called C.M.H. Clark had just published a book of documents of Australian history, and our seminars discussed issues of authenticity and completeness. Might there be other important

documents that Mr Clark had not found? Might he (perish the thought) have got one of them wrong? I found the quest for finding-out much to my taste. Again, I was well taught. Virtually all of those who lectured me in history at UNE went on to chairs in history elsewhere, though I claim no causal connection. In my final honours year we wrestled with whether or not there could be general laws in history. Were Spengler, Toynbee and Marx right about these impersonal dynamics? Though we students were just skating over these large volumes, when pressed I was doubtful, and as the years passed my doubts grew. Years later I would encounter a lovely summary by H.L. Mencken, which captures my own perspective on large issues: "For every complex problem there is a solution that is neat, simple, and wrong."

Postgraduate study

A career in school-teaching, once so obvious and determined, suddenly ended. I won a Commonwealth Postgraduate Scholarship at UNE in 1959, the first year they were offered. I was in heaven. I had learned in my honours year how absorbing research was, and now I could do it full-time. Study was no longer "work". It was fun, rewarding, exciting. I might go on to be an academic, like those who had taught me!

My master's thesis moved quickly into an analysis of the electoral birth of the Country Party in New South Wales. It was political science, not history, but I hardly knew that (UNE was a decade away from offering Political Science as a subject). I needed polling-booth returns, and found where they were. I needed all sorts of new knowledge—geographical, statistical, agricultural economics, land use, census data; I knocked on doors and asked for help. It was given graciously. The ANU liked what I had done, and offered me another scholarship to undertake a PhD. Now I was working on the Country Party as an electoral organisation.

The ANU was larger, wealthier and much more diverse than UNE, but the staff were no less willing to assist a postgraduate student, no longer alone but one of twelve. And I had a great deal to learn, since I had never studied the subject in which I was doing a PhD. One or two others were in the same boat, because political science was a branch of learning that had only existed to a small degree in Australian universities before the war. My training in history gave me a solid base. I travelled New South Wales meeting the men and women who ran the Country Party, read their minute books, learned how the world seemed to them; I went to the Party's head office and wangled my way into discussions about

the coming elections. I joined the Party for a couple of years, which gave me access to the annual conference, as the self-suggested delegate from the Yass branch. I briefly entertained the thought of running for parliament myself—I now knew a lot of people in the Party, and was well regarded. But I had no money, a young family and an unfinished PhD. I had an intellectual hesitation, too, for I fundamentally disagreed that country people needed electoral divisions with substantially smaller enrolments than people who lived in the city, even though country MPs had greater distances to travel in their electorates than their urban counterparts. That claim seemed to me to cut across my notions of what was fair. I could accept that country people belonged in the underdog group, but this was not the way to improve their lot. It seemed a bit off, all things considered, but it was dear to the hearts of Country Party people.

After the ANU came Oxford and then the Institute of Social Research in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Over those years I became absorbed in survey research, where the Golden Rule was to get the small details exactly right, otherwise the outcome would be rubbish. I learned how to program big computers, and learned also, through early failures, to ensure that the minute details were correct, otherwise it would be a case of GIGO—"garbage in, garbage out". Meanwhile, I was moving to the Left, towards Labour in the UK and the Democrats in the US, where I added blacks to my list of underdogs. Martin Luther King was a powerful and attractive figure, and the Selma-to-Montgomery marches had occurred earlier in the year (1965). As the 1960s ended I added "women" to my list of underdogs, as my then wife began to involve herself in the women's movement, and especially the emerging Women's Electoral Lobby.

An academic who writes for newspapers

While I enjoyed both Oxford and the US, and could have made an academic career in either, I wanted to return to Australia, to help shape its future, in some unformed and barely articulated way. I had seen a bit of the world, and thought Australia, not the UK or US, was where my future lay. Oxford fascinated me, but I felt sure that I would either disappear from sight there, with the right accent and the right clothes, or become the college's well-known ocker Aussie. Neither prospect appealed. Nor had I felt comfortable with the American way of life. Two shooting deaths, one of an Indian graduate student, happened within a few blocks of our suburban house. Australia was in the process of change, and I had felt that strongly before

we left. The direction of that change I liked, and I wanted to have a part in it.

Now a young member of staff at the ANU, I joined the Fabian Society, because while I had a strong sympathy for underdogs I had also come to the view that real progress had to come on the basis of sound knowledge and incremental advance. Great revolutions, like the French or the Russian, and strong control by the state, now seemed utterly the wrong way to go, and to be avoided by wise rulers. The Russians had not rid themselves of tyranny, but discovered that they had simply replaced one set of tyrants with another. I developed a good deal of respect for Lord Salisbury and Count Otto von Bismarck, conservatives who saw the need to enrol the working class into society, so that they had a stake in its future. At the same time, I puzzled over the way in which sweeping contemporary social welfare reforms desired by the Left undermined the efforts of so many workers and their families to lead thrifty and provident lives, so that they could secure a modest independence, especially in retirement, and undermined the incentive to do so for those younger. That debate had been going on in England while I was there. What was the point of saving if you were going to get a pension anyway? The journey of my parents gave force to this puzzlement. I decided that what some called “piecemeal engineering” was much more to my taste.

The formative moment in the shaping of my political position came with the offer of a journalistic assignment, to write the Monday editorial for the *Canberra Times*. This task, which I undertook for four years, involved a discussion with the editor, usually on Friday afternoon, and the delivery of the finished essay about 3 p.m. on Sunday. Most often the paper had a position on the issue, and if it lacked one our discussion, led by the editor, would determine it. My own views were given consideration, and might lead to a modification. My take on issues emerged naturally as a consequence of having to write about them; I discovered them, so to speak. A few months later I became a newspaper columnist as well, and since those columns carried my name, it was important for me to be sure about what I was saying, since the columns were widely read. I was to write a weekly column for the next fifteen years, moving to the *National Times*, when it emerged (and I went to Sydney to live), and occasional pieces for every major Australian newspaper.

One thing led to another: I became a speaker on radio and a commentator on television. Once more, it was important to be sure about what I was saying.

A columnist has to be interesting, or readers will skip; the daily news provided the grist for my mill, and my chosen role was to analyse, using history and evidence, and humour, if appropriate (it often was). But one cannot analyse *in vacuo*: one's own preferences will out. In the first year (1968-69) of my columns it became clear to me, as well as my readers, that I was opposed to censorship, thought that homosexuality ought to be legalised and prostitution regulated rather than proscribed, wanted a new system of honours to replace the imperial one, thought ASIO was almost unnecessary (“It would not surprise me at all to discover that ASIO regards this whole article as subversive ...”), thought that some strikes had to be legal, because they were the only real weapon the unions had, and was critical of notions of “offensive behaviour”, and of the conservatism of the RSL. All of this was good Left-liberal stuff that you might expect of a young political scientist. But I also thought that the federal system was a good one, was opposed to centralisation of government, thought that economic growth was a good thing, argued that motorists had responsibilities rather than rights, was in favour of the Pine Gap tracking station (but opposed to the official secrecy about it), and saw decisions about going to war as the essential reason we had governments.

What is the argument? What is the evidence in support of the proposal? What is the evidence against it? The debate about theory and evidence continues today, most obviously in the area of climate science.

Some things are just too difficult and complex to be decided by referendum, a democratic instrument I generally endorsed. Nonetheless, I became increasingly worried about Australia's involvement in the war in Vietnam, and thereafter looked at all proposals that Australia should become involved in foreign “adventures” with a disenchanted eye. I had written a piece advocating armed neutrality (with Sweden the model) as the basis of my preferred foreign and defence policy. I have stayed with it ever since, notwithstanding the larger defence force, and expenditure, that would be required.

Where did all this come from? I had never formally studied philosophy, political science, political theory or social theory. I knew Marx from my History honours year in 1958, knew Freud from Psychology I, and had only the faintest notion of the work of Charles Darwin. But I had always read, and read widely. Some bits stuck. J.S. Mill's *On Liberty* stuck. So did Popper's *The Open Society and*

Its Enemies. Getting the data right, and using it to test hypotheses, grew in importance as I moved into survey research, though that dictum was simply an extension of the rules I had learned in History. In re-reading some of these newspaper columns after nearly fifty years I am struck by how steadfastly I have adhered to the positions I had then. And that suggests to me that I had been internally working them out over the years through reading, thinking and discussion—and that they made good sense for me.

Henry Kissinger has remarked that officials “leave office with the perceptions and insights with which they entered. They learn how to make decisions but not what decisions to make.” (I owe this aphorism to a book review by my former colleague Harry Gelber in a recent issue of *Quadrant*.) I’m not sure Kissinger’s summary is exactly true of me, at least in the spheres in which I moved. I went to Sydney at the end of 1971 to set up the Politics discipline at Macquarie University. The tasks of designing a curriculum and choosing staff found me with an already-formed political position. I did know what decisions I wanted to make, and made them (it was still, to a degree, the era of the “god professor”). I hesitate to use the word *ideology*, because I was not in any real way evangelistic about it. I was sure that good argument had to be based on good data, evidence—facts. I agreed that facts were often hard to find, but one needed to work to find them, and I taught, and led the discipline, from that perspective.

From time to time I felt almost fraudulent in “professing” a subject I hardly knew, at least through formal study, and confessed this to my friend Peter Mason, Macquarie’s Professor of Physics, who laughed. “We all feel like that, sooner or later,” he said. “You can’t possibly know it all. No one does. Just keep going!” And I did.

Since much of university life, at least at the more senior levels, involves abundant committee work and argument, I felt increasingly confident in the positions I took in those debates. I also felt that anyone in management roles needed to be coherent and consistent, and to follow that rule required one to have examined one’s positions carefully. Keynes is reported to have said, to someone who accused him of a back-flip, “When the facts change, I change my opinion. What do you do, sir?” That was my philosophical bedrock, too, though it was many years before I discovered the Keynes quotation. Told I was a logical positivist, a position that had been discredited, I shrugged. It seemed to work for me. I was clear, as a former sergeant, that my role as the head of my discipline was a steward’s role. I was there to build a good “department” (Macquarie had eschewed that form), and hand it on in good

shape to my successor. When I became Chairman of the Australian Research Council and then Vice-Chancellor of the University of Canberra, my working ethic was just the same.

Theory or data?

A good example of where I stood, ideologically, can be seen in the later 1970s when an argument developed about the importance of concepts of “class” in understanding Australian politics. My own survey research (*Stability and Change in Australian Politics*, 1977), and David Kemp’s similar research at the same time (*Society and Electoral Behaviour in Australia*, 1978), suggested strongly that Australians had no sense of “class” as a determinant of their political attitudes and behaviour: they identified with the party of their choice, for the most part. According to the class theorists of the time, R.W. Connell and T.H. Irving (*Ruling Class, Ruling Culture*, 1977, and *Class Structure in Australian History*, 1980), such a conclusion was both wrong and irrelevant. They argued that all David Kemp and I had discovered in our research was that Australians had “false consciousness” about their real position in society. There was a “ruling class”, and Australians generally were not part of it at all. They were, in fact, “working class” whether they knew it or not, or cared or not. Such an approach, which flowed from Engels via Marcuse, was a kind of intellectual *coup d’état*. It seemed to me that if Connell and Irving were correct, then empirical, fact-based social science and history were pointless, but since they themselves were adroit and productive scholars in these fields, using just such methods, their position was almost self-contradictory. For them, theory (and “class theory” was *the* theory) must triumph over empiricism.

For me, a theory that could not stand the test of empirical verification of some kind had no real meaning or utility. That judgment has nothing much to do with either liberalism or conservatism. It flows from, or so it seems to me, the basic test that we should apply to all public-policy proposals. What is the argument? What is the evidence in support of the proposal? What is the evidence against it? The debate about theory and evidence continues today, most obviously in the area of climate science.

In 1980 I returned to the ANU as head of my old department, but before long I had left an academic research agenda for the worlds of policy, in my case higher education, research, and science and technology. The ANU, the Australian Research Grants Committee (ARGC) and the Australian Science and Technology Council (ASTEC) were all publicly funded, and all dealt with the production of knowledge. For those inside universities and

research organisations it was plain how important their work was, and indeed how important they themselves were as producers of that work. What they needed, all of them, all the time, was more money, and to be left alone to expend it. Outside their domains it was all a lot less clear. Exactly what was it that the community received for its expenditure? Would Australia be worse off if research funds were not increased? One Secretary of the Department of Finance told me that if it had been up to him, the ARGC's funding would just end, like that: the ARGC was of no use to society as a whole, however much academics liked it.

As someone who now had to argue for more public funding, I searched for a more explicit link between what we received and what we provided in return, and found the link in research priorities. Some research areas were arguably more important to Australia than others, and they should get more funding. That argument suited the mood of the time, especially within government, and the new Australian Research Council (ARC), which I left higher education to establish, did its best to satisfy government that it was on the right track. Nearly thirty years later the ARC flourishes, but I fear that priorities for the nation may have become priorities for the current government, whatever party is in power. Then and later, I became wedded to the view that public money was other people's money, and there had to be a real understanding on the part of recipients that the spending of public money had to be in the public interest. It was not a prize, a gift or an entitlement.

At the beginning of 1991, my term as chairman having expired, I left the ARC to become the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Canberra, a new creation that had been the Commonwealth's only direct experiment in colleges of advanced education. It was in many respects the most satisfying job I ever had. UC was an underdog in the university world. I was for underdogs. As the second university in the nation's capital, it had to be different from the ANU, and I had my ideas about how to make that difference an excellent one. The new university had its own traditions, and I respected those—they were the basis of its future. But a hard look at data that the university had itself collected, and an openness to debate and discussion, allowed the staff to tackle their problems themselves. I was conservative about what constituted high quality in education, and since UC's new motto was "educating professionals, professionally" I was able to avoid the more

extreme intellectual fashions in higher education. I stayed there for twelve years, and left only because I felt everything had become just too comfortable, for me as well as for my staff. I am happy to say that the University of Canberra is in excellent shape today. It was good, and it is now better. That is the way things should be.

In retrospect

Looking back, I seem to have been a conservative who felt that underdogs needed help to stand on their own two feet, in what has become an increasingly diverse world. I welcome the diversity, and want to preserve what seem to me to have been extraordinary advances in the quality of Australian life over my working lifetime. There is nothing original at all in my political position, which would be shared by perhaps two-thirds of Australia's MPs. The basis of our society is a fair go for people who want to be responsible for themselves, and need a bit of help to get there. There are those who would like Australia to be like Sweden, with a cradle-to-grave social welfare system. I am not one of them, no socialist at all, despite my long-standing concern for underdogs. Australia's safety-net system, supported by the world's most extensive voluntary network, seems to work well, and it evolved out of our

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experience, which is a plus. Yes, there are people who miss out, as there are in every human system. I am no utopian and have no belief in the possibility of a perfect human society. The old Fabian notion of incremental change based on good evidence seems to me the right way to go. (The present Fabian Society in Australia has forgotten its intellectual roots, and I no longer belong to it.)

It follows that I see the nation-state as the proper arena in which human progress occurs. I see the United Nations as a necessary but greatly flawed attempt to provide an arena in which nation-states can co-operate and, yes, compete. Attempts to solve humanity's problems by UN fiat I see as wrong-headed and nearly always wrong in practice. Our federal system allows people in the six states and two territories to learn from each other, and I am almost instantly suspicious of any dramatic proposal to have a nationwide way of doing things imposed from the centre. So I look without much favour on initiatives such as a national curriculum, the NBN, and the NDIS, let alone excrescences like the Climate Change Authority. Let Popper

say it for me: “our greatest troubles spring from something that is as admirable and sound as it is dangerous—from our impatience to better the lot of our fellows” (preface to the second edition of *The Open Society and Its Enemies*).

There was political correctness when I was young. We stood in the cinema when the King’s image appeared on the screen, for example, and I have watched the shape and character of PC change over time. I didn’t much like it when I was young, and like it no more today. I stick to data, good argument and their inter-relation. I note, for example, that 75 per cent of Australia’s 700,000 Aboriginal people live in cities, and that most of them are in jobs like everyone else. Perhaps “assimilation” has passed out of polite usage, but the data suggest that in the long run we will not need to use the term “Aboriginal Australians”. More than 30,000 Aboriginal students have graduated from university, and 14,000 Aboriginal students are enrolled in university today. Australia is best seen as “multi-ethnic”, not “multicultural”. For me, education, especially for girls and especially in the developing world, is the path for the future. The same concern for data suggests to me that the proposed catastrophe from not ceasing to burn fossil fuels is unproven and quite unlikely. In

any case, no government in the world is actually following the abolition path: Western society, and indeed all societies today that are settled and have cities, utterly depend on fossil fuels as the basis for grid power and transportation.

How did my worldview form? An early timing, I think. Thereafter, my lived experience modified or emphasised the effects of growing up in a particular family at a particular time, through instruction, reading, observing and arguing. School and university were important, even if I did not think so at the time. I became a craftsman in writing, and go on offering my analysis and opinion, occasionally in print, but much more often on my website, which garners about 20,000 hits a month. I find that some of what I am saying there is remarkably similar to what I was saying in newspaper columns nearly fifty years ago. And there is still an audience for it. Google Analytics tells me that three-quarters of my readers are under forty-five, which gives me hope for the future!

Don Aitkin AO, a historian, political scientist and novelist, was the Foundation Chairman of the Australian Research Council and the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Canberra from 1991 to 2002. He blogs at www.donaitkin.com.

The Old Card Player

She is seen
 but not heard.
 Age has stolen her voice.
 She snails around on wheels,
 borrows books for company.
 Strangers think she’s one screw loose
 but nothing could be further from the truth.
 She brings to cards a pencil, pad
 to write what’s bottled up inside:
 “My sister had car accident today,”
 takes some time for her to “say”
 but the ladies playing cards
 pause, and sympathise.
 She feels them draw around her.
 A wish to win has fondly earned the name
 “Assassin” though she doesn’t know.
 Anxiety is in her eyes
 of someone on the rack
 but when she’s found a friend
 becoming one with them
 the beauty of a voice is handed back.

Coffee Drinker

He shambles to the cafe
 defining the ground with his cane
 and orders coffee black
 suspenders holding up his pants
 comb-lined hair slicked back.
 Content with silence or dry word
 the place, the caffeine taste
 knowing the regulars
 is what he likes
 and talk of weather
 a wife behind, content to be alone
 as he is, knowing this will still be here
 tomorrow when he’s back—
 more memories of where he used to swim
 with mates at tea bag bay
 then on to other coffee camps
 he’s sown along the track.

Nana Ollerenshaw