

**IDEAS AND INFLUENCE:  
SOCIAL SCIENCE AND PUBLIC POLICY IN AUSTRALIA**

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What next after neoliberalism? What alternative worldviews are emerging to take its place? What can social science contribute to the shaping of those alternatives? *Ideas and Influence* explores these questions broadly and within specific sectors of social policy, and in so doing, contributes to the development of a post-neo-liberal agenda for policy-relevant social science research and outreach.

This volume is more coherent and integrated than many edited volumes, thanks in part to an effective introduction that weaves key themes from the chapters together, and also thanks to the efforts of most of the chapter authors to address not only the content of their assigned policy areas, but also the question of how past and future social science can exert influence over policy in each of those areas. The book is especially strong on historical and cross-country comparisons, which helps the reader place current Australian social policy on a sort of global timeline. It describes how trends in social science and policy approaches have evolved unevenly across different countries over the past hundred years, but with an overall trajectory toward neo-liberal approaches in the developed, English-speaking countries. The historical accounts of public policy's relationship to social science in the areas of indigenous affairs (Chapter 9), economic policy (Chapter 2), and gender-related policy (Table 8.1) are especially informative.

The book's contribution to policy thinking and action may be viewed from several perspectives. Both academic and practitioner readers will find the book useful for its thoughtful summaries of developments within specific social policy areas in Australia; New Zealand readers will find it useful for making comparisons across the Tasman. In addition, it could serve as the opening move toward a research-planning exercise for social scientists in Australia and elsewhere. Toward that end, most of the chapter authors offer more or less specific recommendations about future research questions, which range from the effects of high effective marginal tax rates on the behaviour of actual and potential welfare beneficiaries to the implications of counter-terrorism measures for the future of democracy.

The book's thoughtfully written introduction also provides a good launching pad for a revitalised debate about the capacity of social science to influence policy, and the propriety of various types of relationships between policymakers, researchers and

research work. Although the introduction and many of the chapters present a realistic and unvarnished view of social science's prospects for influencing what are ultimately political decisions, including many of the most significant obstacles to influence, all of the authors clearly believe that more social science input into policy would on balance improve policy outcomes. For the sake of balance and constructive dialogue, it would have been nice to see a more sceptical voice added to the mix to raise the general question of what should be done when social science is not merely irrelevant, but is actually harmful to good policy – and who will be relied upon to judge such an outcome. Chapter 9 notes the chequered history of expert input to indigenous affairs policy in Australia, but the possibility of today's social scientists getting things badly wrong is not addressed forthrightly in this chapter or elsewhere in the volume. The authors may be more concerned about social scientists being shy than being wrong.

The book in general would have been strengthened by either the addition of a few dissenting voices or the requirement that individual chapters engage more directly with opposing views. Chapter 10 on liberty and security, for example, is essentially a call to arms aimed at awakening Australian social scientists to the threats posed by counter-terrorism policies that erode civil liberties. Although the chapter's central argument is a potentially powerful one, it is weakened by the failure to seriously examine the arguments that have been made in favour of the counter-terrorism measures specifically and in favour of stronger executive control over national security policymaking in general. Some of the political rhetoric of the Howard government is introduced, but rather than systematically addressing the flaws in these political arguments, they are quickly dismissed with counter-rhetoric. This chapter raises some critically important issues, but it will not persuade anyone who is not already ideologically disposed toward its conclusions. Distinctions between the concepts of democracy and civil liberties might also have been more clearly drawn in this chapter so that the author could analyse the relationships between these core values more systematically.

A slightly different problem of ideological balance is found in Chapter 3, where potential clashes between the New Public Management approach that dominated the 1990s, and currently popular notions of governance, social learning and network-focused models of public management, are not discussed. Likewise, Chapter 11 does not acknowledge the central dilemma that arises when states settle on a definition of the good (i.e. quality of life) for their citizens – namely, competing concepts of the good. Whose concept of the good should the state favour as normative for all of its citizens: that of the workaholics or the downshifters, the cultural creatives or the materialists, fundamentalists or civil libertarians, collectivists or individualists? Chapter 11 would have benefited from stronger philosophical grounding, such as that found in Chapter 5 (which makes good use of Albert Hirschman's analysis of the two main rhetorical and substantive challenges to social policy – the theses of perversity and futility).

Taken as a whole, the volume builds a strong case against neo-liberalism based on this ideology's destructive effects on both social science and social policy. However, that case would have been even stronger if dissenting views had been presented in more robust form, and then addressed (refuted) with a combination of social science evidence and normative argument. Chapter 2 on economic liberalism offers a good model of this approach.

*Ideas and Influence* is well worth reading and keeping as a reference guide to recent social policy history and developments in all of the key policy areas, not only in Australia, but throughout the English-speaking developed world. The inclusion of a chapter on spatially oriented policy is worth noting, for this is an important social policy dimension that is not always included in volumes of this kind.

Regardless of the reader's particular social policy specialty, I would recommend reading the whole volume in order to see cross-cutting themes emerging across different authors and policy areas. For example, following Ian Marsh's example (Chapter 12), several authors refer to the potential role that Parliament could play in revitalising both public and expert input into policymaking. The theme of expanding the economist's horizon and worldview also cuts across chapters. Various authors talk about the importance of incorporating concepts such as sustainability and quality of life beyond material interests (Chapter 11 on quality of life), care activities alongside the usual categories of labour and leisure (Chapter 7 on work and family), and the social and cultural dimensions of the "value" that "human capital" can produce (Chapter 4 on education). Chapter 9 provides a particularly stimulating discussion of the different roles played by economists and anthropologists in the last hundred years of policymaking around indigenous peoples.

With neo-liberalism losing its dominant position nearly everywhere, social scientists may have greater opportunities to shape the next phase of policymaking both through direct influences on key actors and through indirect channels that flow through the media shaping professional opinion and shaping public opinion (see Chapter 1). So far, efforts to characterise the ideological and policy phase in which we currently find ourselves have not been wholly successful. Elements of a sort of pragmatic, third-way approach can be seen here and there, but these terms mean many different things to different people and, as noted in this volume, different countries are evolving in different ways. As an edited volume, *Ideas and Influence* could not be expected to break entirely new ground in describing our current phase or in redesigning the role of social science in an emerging post-neo-liberal world, but it nonetheless provides an excellent historical and cross-country foundation for further inquiry. This book assembles an impressive list of top Australian social scientists to help frame not only the big questions that should be asked in social policy going forward, but also the types of inquiry and evidence that will be needed to answer those questions.