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George Megalogenis, *The Longest Decade*, Scribe, Melbourne, 2006

In recent years George Megalogenis, a journalist with *The Australian*, has taken up the intellectual project pioneered by Paul Kelly; the writing of books on recent Australian politics that combine a narrative of political dramas with a broader interpretation of changing Australian politics and society. *The Longest Decade* is his latest work; it is a valuable work and a considerable improvement on Paul Kelly's recent output. Megalogenis contends that the competing camps of 'Howard huggers' and 'Howard haters' have both overstated the divergences between Paul Keating and John Howard. Drawing on extensive interviews with both men he argues that both shared a commitment to the project of economic liberalisation that has reshaped Australia. Up to here the argument is unoriginal, a little too consciously designed to challenge an imagined left-liberal audience, but Megalogenis goes beyond this simple paradox to consider the broader social changes that have accompanied economic liberalisation; the decline of the male breadwinner, society and the explosion in consumer debt. Whatever its many flaws Kelly's work tried to integrate economic and political analysis, Megalogenis continues this project and does a better job than Kelly to whom electors outside Canberra appear only as the members of focus groups channelled by Rod Cameron or Mark Textor. Megalogenis places more emphasis on shifts in gender relations than questions of race and ethnicity and this is refreshing. In part Megalogenis' work is a more popular espousal of the argument espoused by empiricist political scientists, such as Murray Goot, and Liberal pragmatists, such as Andrew Norton, that left-liberal observers have overestimated the significance of John Howard's cultural politics.

Megalogenis provides a more developed analysis of economic reform than many of the critics of 'neo-liberalism' who simply reverse the terms of Kelly's analysis. The book outlines the patterns of social change since the 1980s in a loosely chronological format, and considers how Keating and Howard have contributed to these changes and tried to take political advantage of them. Along the way there are chapters on key events of the period; the Mabo and Wik debates, East Timor, the Cronulla riots and some interesting material from interviews with the two protagonists, there is also material from interviews with Jeff Kennett, cast in Megalogenis' overstretched interpretation as a kind of bridge between Howard and Keating. These interviews are a valuable source. The political and social analysis is also combined with some interesting reflections on the reflections of economic change in popular culture.

Megalogenis pays limited obeisance to the conventional views on economic reform. He dismisses the GST debate as a case of accountancy masquerading as nation building and attributes much of the economic boom to a sustained reduction in the wages share of national income, which has been assisted by the fact that women continue to be underpaid relative to men. The focus on the importance of trends in wages and profits recalls Marxist scholarship, such as the work of Tom Bramble and Rick Kuhn, of which Megalogenis is no doubt unaware. Unlike many other journalists he is aware that government budgetary balances are less the result of political will than a reflection of the level of economic activity. However economic inequality is largely seen by Megalogenis in terms of joblessness and social exclusion.

In his examination of the social basis of political change Megalogenis relies on a simple form of ecological analysis in which he divides electorates into high, middle and low income categories. It is a pity he does not supplant this analysis by a consideration of individual survey data, such as that in the Australian Election Studies, for this would support his analysis. He pays brief homage to popular theories of working-class conservatism and aspirational voters but correctly identifies the basis of Coalition electoral success in an appeal to middle and higher-income voters. He argues that since 1996 successive Labor campaigns made a mistake in their focus on tax reductions for lower income earners. He contends that this strategy failed to realise how many lower-income voters were rusted-on conservatives and that Labor read too much into the 1998 election result. I suspect that an examination of individual survey data would challenge this interpretation but still it is a more convincing critique of Labor than the popular media cliché that post-1996 the party somehow repudiated the economic reforms of Keating. Megalogenis acutely observes that populist opposition to aspects of economic deregulation does not indicate a left-wing position.

Megalogenis' argument that Howard has healed the social divisions of the Keating era seems overstated, although again a use of individual survey data, such as the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, would actually have bolstered his case. Megalogenis' own personal reflections on his experience as the child of post-war migrants informs his analysis although at times he is too keen to apply this template to the experience of other culturally divergent groups. Overall this is a valuable work of political history and it would be a useful addition to the reading list for any Australian politics subject.

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