

**Beyond the Cultural Cringe:
The future of the 'Australian' in Australian political science**

Presidential Address

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One of the appeals of taking on the Presidency of APSA was the impetus to be involved in thinking about the discipline more broadly than I usually do and also to have the occasion through the Presidential address to share my views about the direction of the discipline with my friends and colleagues in political science.

The theme of this year's conference is *The Future of Politics and Political Science*, and a number of panels have been scheduled to discuss the future of various sub-disciplines as well as the broader questions around the future of politics as practice. Today I want to focus on the future of the Australian in Australian political science. I raise this question because I believe that there are factors, many outside our control, that are providing disincentives to the pursuit of high quality political science addressing specifically Australian topics. Related to this issue of whether we should undertake research and how much on Australian topics, is the question of how we then engage with the broader community with respect to the findings of our research — particularly when those findings have a normative or values dimension.

Before I proceed though, I would like to explain my use of the expression 'cultural cringe' in the title of today's address. The term was originally coined in a much narrower context than it tends to be used today — with a focus on literature and literary criticism (Hume 1993 [1991]: 16). Its creator, A A Phillips (1966) was a critic of the 'Cringe' — which he capitalised in his writing as if it were a character like the Magic Pudding. He argued that 'the Cringe is a worse enemy to our cultural development than our isolation, and that the opposite of the

Cringe is not the Strut [also capitalised] but a relaxed erectness of carriage' (1966: 117). Phillips suggested that the 'denaturalised intellectual' was 'the Cringe's unhappiest victim' (1966: 116).

Writing some three decades after Phillips' first edition, Brian Head (1988: 1) argued that 'The central assumption of the cultural cringe was that intellectual work produced in Australia was thought to be necessarily derivative (an inferior imitation) or awkwardly provincial (judged by standards adumbrated in the overseas metropolis)'. More recently Rod Rhodes (2010) rejected the cultural cringe argument as explaining much about Australian political science.

I use the term with some caution, noting L J Hume's concerns that it has in the past been employed somewhat uncritically; he wrote that 'the literature of the cringe lacks systematic exposition and flits from topic to topic as its authors' fancies take it' (Hume 1993 [1991]). Hume's rejection of the existence of the cringe focused on a range of elements of cultural life. His discussion of the cringe within universities focused on only a few examples — the Ern Malley affair and a couple of debates in the pages of the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*. He used these examples to argue that Brian Head and Jim Walter had insufficient evidence to sustain their claims in their 1988 edited collection, *Intellectual Movements and Australian Society*. It is worth noting that Hume's piece, originally published in the *Political Theory Newsletter* in 1991, was reprinted by the Centre for Independent Studies a couple of years later. The editorial note by the CIS contextualised Hume's piece in terms of a rejection of a progressive nationalism that was 'a product of insecurity and self-doubt' (Champion 1993: 9).

I wonder, though, how Hume would interpret the cultural cringe some 25 years on given the incentive structures facing Australian academics. There is scope, I think, for a stocktake of Australian political studies: in terms of research on Australian topics; the teaching of Australian politics; and publication in Australian journals. Irrespective of the state of the discipline on these measures, there is cause for concern that the focus on rankings, metrics, impact factors and the like is having a detrimental effect on the discipline — in effect

inducing a cringe-like outcome. I am concerned that we are increasingly being pushed away from studying Australian topics and publishing in Australian journals. Even the nature of our collaborations is under scrutiny, with pressure to demonstrate the value of our work by indicating how many international collaborators think we are worth working with.

I am coming at this topic from the position of an avowedly passionate Australianist. Like all of us, I have worked with international collaborators and published and will continue to publish in international journals. I hope that the more theoretical contributions I make are broadly applicable beyond Australian examples. My work starts, though, with a deep understanding of, and interest in, Australian politics and policy. Partly this is because I came to academia relatively late with something of a comparative advantage in the field of rural policy from my previous life as a public policy practitioner. It seemed obvious to me to explore the broader questions of policy and politics by drawing on a subject area in which I was already relatively expert. More importantly, though, I believe that those of us in publicly funded universities should be engaging with issues of relevance to the communities that allow us to pursue what has to be one of the best jobs imaginable — researching issues that we find intrinsically interesting; working with and learning from brilliant colleagues who stretch our minds and inspire our ideas; and teaching and mentoring undergraduate and postgraduate students, many of whom are smarter and more talented than we are.

My scholarly patriotism is based in a conviction that our own political system is worthy of study, and contains lessons for others beyond our borders. Australia is one of the oldest continuous democracies. It was the first to have a labour government and one of the first to give women the vote. We have the only remaining agrarian political party in the developed world which, in spite of decades of commentary to the contrary, refuses to turn up its toes and die and continues to spend more time in government than out of it. We have a population exceeding that of many of the countries that have received a lot more attention in the parties literature and we have a distinctive constitutional system. I am not arguing a form of Australian exceptionalism, but rather making the point that understanding our own political and policy processes can contribute to broader theoretical debates in our discipline

but is also intrinsically worthwhile in its own right. Coincidentally, a similar point was made with respect to Canadian political science in Alain Noël's Presidential address to the Canadian PSA in 2014. He (Noël 2014: 653) argued that 'When we study our own country, we do more than test a general theory. We seek to explain, and also understand, an aspect of our collective experience and do so with the hope of producing usable knowledge and of engaging in the social and political life of our own society. These are noble objectives, about which we do not need to apologize'. He went on to argue that 'there are certain arguments that are best expressed and defended by a national, by someone who belongs to a given society' (Noël 2014: 660). He called on Canadian political scientists to take pride in the role of 'citizen scholars' (Noël 2014: 662).

My view is similar. As Australians, I believe we are best placed to research our own system of government and I would like to give a few examples of the problems that emerge when we leave analysis of Australian politics to others.

First, as I have pointed out elsewhere (2015), there has been a disturbing tendency for the literature to bundle Australia into discussions of Westminster systems when there are so many features of our constitution, starting with the existence of the constitution itself of course, that belie that categorisation. The dismissal of the Whitlam government should stand as the clearest example that we are not a Westminster system and yet we are increasingly seeing the language of British politics creeping into the analysis of Australian issues.

Second, there is a consistent misunderstanding in the international literature of the nature of the Australian party system. At the 2008 Brisbane APSA, I gave a paper on the Coalition, specifically pointing out how mistaken the international literature has tended to be in its understanding and analysis of this distinctive feature of Australian politics. A member of the audience asked me a question framed in terms of the 'Zanzibar exception'; seeking, I think, to make the point that it was unrealistic to expect every possible permutation of coalitions

to be considered in the international literature and, by implication suggesting that Australia was a minor case. In other words, did it really matter if the literature consistently gets it wrong?

Third, it seems to me that there is a distinct advantage in the teaching and researching of politics to have grown up in and lived in that political system. I do not underestimate the advantages of analysis from without, but analysis from within a system is equally critical. Those of us who lived through the dismissal of the Whitlam government, or through the policy debates of the Hawke years, have a particular insight into Australian politics which is not just based in our scholarship but in lived experience. Given that politics is at its heart about the way communities live together and make collective decisions, that direct participation in and observation of the minutiae of Australian politics can only serve to enrich our understanding as we go about our research and teaching.

If we accept the Zanzibar analysis and not worry if the literature paints an inaccurate picture of our political system, or if Australian politics receives scant scholarly attention while we all focus our research on other topics in order to publish in highly ranked international journals, we are doing the Australian public a disservice and the discipline will become increasingly irrelevant. We are already, as Hal Colebatch has observed (2002: 83-84), seeing economics pushing political science out of the halls of power as the go-to discipline for evidence for policy. Why is it that when questions of politics are in the news, journalists tend to interview each other for analysis rather than call on members of our profession? In my very unscientific observation, this does not seem to occur to the same extent with respect to questions of economics — and certainly not when it comes to issues within the natural sciences. Perhaps this issue is part of a malaise with political science more broadly, what Matthew Flinders (2013) has described as the ‘Tyranny of Irrelevance’ and which is apparently a problem beyond Australia. Or it could be a consequence of ignoring Pat Weller’s (2014: 248) call to avoid jargon-laden language because ‘We write about politics, not chemistry; [...] We cannot write in our own impenetrable jargon and complain when we are ignored’.

Even if you were all to agree with me and we collectively decided that there was a need for a reinvigoration of political research on Australia and Australian topics, we face some serious disincentives to pursuing this. As universities seek to improve or sustain their positions in the various institutional league tables — in order, among other goals, to attract international students and the associated income — university strategies become increasingly focused on the metrics that matter. This can lead to irritating but not insignificant choices being made — for example to use Scopus rather than Google Scholar as the source of citation counts and H indices. Our discipline loses out as a result, with Scopus underreporting citations by as much as a factor of 10 because of the limited sources it includes in its count. We are therefore being encouraged to cease writing book chapters and focus exclusively on journal articles. We all know that some of the seminal works of our discipline have appeared as book chapters and there is considerable value in well-constructed, cohesive edited collections. But if it can't be counted, it seems it doesn't count.

I am concerned about explicit and implicit pressure from our institutions not to publish in Australian journals. I find this problematic. First, I believe that we should be supporting our own journal, the *Australian Journal of Political Science*. I am surprised by how many of my colleagues have never or only rarely publish in AJPS. Second, there is a belief that somehow publishing in another Association's national journal is a sign of quality or esteem that does not attach to publishing in AJPS. As Jason Sharman and Pat Weller (2009) pointed out, the *American Political Science Review* and the *British Journal of Political Science* are no more 'international' journals than AJPS; they largely service their local markets and publish work on their national political systems by scholars based within their borders. Simon Hix summed this up in a 2004 article as follows: 'although APSR is widely respected as the top political science journal, it is nonetheless the 'in-house' journal of the American Political Science Association. Not surprisingly, only 7 per cent of articles in APSR between 1996 and 1999 were by scholars based outside the US' (Hix 2004: 296). Rod Rhodes (2010: 18) expressed the problem I have with all of this very nicely, telling the British PSA conference of

Australian political science that 'The cultural cringe hangs around in the stress on international benchmarking; for example, we are enjoined to publish in the 'best' journals, which means Northern hemisphere journals...'

Data provided by Taylor and Francis show that between 2010 and 2014, Australia was the country of origin of the authors of 68.7 per cent of the submissions to AJPS. 52.9 per cent of these were accepted for publication — which is comparable with the overall acceptance rate for all articles in the journal. Of course not all of these Australia-originating manuscripts covered Australian topics, although the bulk of them did. A very small number of the overseas-originating papers addressed Australian topics. Although not strictly comparable because their data were published in 2009, Sharman and Weller found that 'A*' US journals 'are often over 90% filled by authors from American universities'. On this measure the *Australian Journal of Political Science* is more international than APSR.

Third, to publish in these 'international' journals often requires comparative work; an Australian topic is unlikely to be regarded as sufficiently interesting. Not all of us are, or aspire to be, comparativists and there is a risk that, in order to achieve the goal of publishing in these journals, we are tempted into poor comparative work, being expert on only one of the examples used to illustrate a point and basing our analysis on only a superficial understanding of the other cases. This potentially leads to the type of flaws that we see in the parties literature when Australia is bundled in as an example of two-party systems. This problem can of course be overcome by publishing collaboratively with international colleagues.

Which brings me to the next issue of the criteria against which our success is often ranked. When is an international colleague not an international colleague? I have published several pieces with Carsten Daugbjerg. When he was still in Denmark, I was able to tick the box that I was collaborating internationally, now he is at ANU I cannot. Does this mean any future collaboration with Carsten will not be as intellectually sound or make as useful a scholarly

contribution as previously? Our recently arrived colleagues from overseas have a ready-made set of international collaborators in all of those with whom they published in their home countries. Has the value of their work increased because they are no longer in the same country? These propositions are clearly absurd.

Even though the ARC abandoned the journal ranking system, it is still widely used. Impact Factors are increasingly used, but as we all know these are also problematic, varying wildly by discipline. I have colleagues in urban and regional planning who regularly publish in journals with impact factors well in excess of 2. The emphasis on impact factors and the recourse to the outdated journal rankings militates against the emergence of new journals as, unless authors are feeling particularly altruistic, they are unlikely to send top quality output to an unranked journal with no impact factor.

It seems to me that there is a career risk for political scientists who choose to specialise in Australian politics and policy and I worry about the future of research in these fields. Those of us who are established in our careers can afford to thumb our noses at the incentive structures and continue to research Australian topics and publish largely in Australian journals. The situation is different for our young colleagues and early career researchers. I have seen a selection panel member's eyes light up on finding the *American Political Science Review* on a candidate's CV in way that does not occur for AJPS. Early career researchers (ECRs) in my institution are very aware of the incentive structures and metrics that matter for their career progression. Unlike my experience as an ECR, they all seem to know in which Field of Research code they publish and more importantly in which FOR code their institution expects them to publish and what the top journals are in that code. To what extent does this recognition steer them away from researching Australian topics? This is perhaps a topic that APSA could pick up in the future for investigation. On a related matter, I was quietly pleased when I found out that Amazon's survey tool Mechanical Turk was limiting its use by non-US researchers as this was providing another force pushing our young researchers away from Australian topics towards developing their ideas on the basis of US public opinion.

As more and more researchers are pushed by institutional factors to publish in fewer and fewer 'top' journals, I wonder about the pressure on editors. Are they being flooded with more and more material that is less and less relevant to their journals and not of sufficient quality? How many scholars are suffering the disappointment associated with rejection of their work from these journals when it may have been accepted in journals to which it was far better suited — not necessarily in terms of being of poorer quality, but in terms of having greater focus and a relevant readership. With colleagues, I have recently submitted a paper to *Agriculture and Human Values*. This was chosen not because of its impact factor — which, as it happens, is a healthy 1.6 — but because our article was about agriculture and values. I have published a number of articles in the *Australian Journal of Public Administration* because of its audience. As the journal of the Institute of Public Administration of Australia, it is sent to many senior public servants and decision makers. The Impact Factor may only be just over 0.4 but its real impact is likely to be much higher if policy analysis is read by the right people and influences their thinking on an issue.

Publishing about Australian topics and in Australian journals does not and should not mean quality is compromised. *Australian* political science can be and should be as rigorous as other areas of the discipline. It needs to be theoretically informed and empirically sound. As Ann Capling pointed out in her APSA presidential address a few years ago, political science is not advocacy or journalism. In many ways when we are commenting on Australian politics that admonition carries even more weight to ensure that our contributions are seen by the broader public for what they are — research based findings not partisan and personal opinions. Otherwise our views on politics as political scientists are given no greater weight than the political opinions of the average citizen. Perhaps Alan Fenna was right in his APSA presidential address when he argued against activism and suggested that our discipline's best contribution to political debate is indirect rather than direct. This is a position shared by Peter John who believes that the focus should be on intellectual excellence rather than what Matthew Flinders describes as '*public* political science' (2013: 222 – italics in original). My personal position leans more toward Peter

John's position than Matthew Flinders' — partly for the reasons outlined that if we are to engage in the values-laden political debates of the day we need to be very careful that our views are seen as firmly anchored in our research and are therefore not susceptible to being rejected or ignored as personal opinion. I propose that our input into debate is more likely to be respected if we act, to use Roger Pielke's (2007) language, as 'honest brokers of policy alternatives' rather than as issue advocates.

In a recent article, Gerry Stoker (2013) discussed the issue of the role of political science with respect to the distinction between identifying and analysing problems and taking a position in developing and advocating solutions. He summed up one perspective on this distinction as follows:

The nature of politics is such that it is driven by differences over values and interests. There can be no claim to the common good or efficiency. Offering solutions inevitably drifts into taking sides and that is not appropriate. (2013: 176)

The alternative perspective is that, and again I quote, 'Political science should, as part of its vocation, seek not to pursue an agenda driven by its own theories or methods as if it was in a separate world, sealed off from the concern of its fellow citizens' (2013: 176). Stoker calls for political science to adopt 'design thinking', which he argues is not too far from mainstream political science but allows for engagement with solutions as well as analysis of problems. He concludes by arguing that 'We owe it to our fellow citizens to understand through rigorous, replicable and transparent research not only how politics works, but how the insights from that research can be more widely shared to develop a better politics' (Stoker 2013: 180). For me, an important group of those 'fellow citizens' to whom we owe this debt are Australian and it is therefore important as a discipline that we analyse Australian problems and design solutions for the Australian context.

Conclusion

In summary then, I am concerned that institutional factors are providing disincentives to the pursuit of quality research on Australian topics published in Australian journals for an Australian audience. I worry that these factors also dissuade our postgraduate students and early career colleagues from working in these areas as the reward structures appear to be

increasingly skewed against them. So what can we do about this? First, I think that APSA has a role not only in promoting the discipline of political science in Australia but also in promoting the activities of the discipline focused on Australia. Second, I think we need to be diligent within our institutions as we debate and consider strategic plans and performance review frameworks to ensure that the consequences for the study of Australian policy and politics are taken into account by university hierarchies. Even if we are not involved in these processes we are involved in assessing ARC grant applications and reviewing journal articles — individual activities in which judgments are made about track records and the quality of research outputs. The benchmark for judging quality should be excellence not simply whether a journal or a collaborator originate from what Michael Crozier (2001: 100) has called the ‘Great Elsewhere’. Third, we need to ensure that the research we undertake and publish on Australian topics is of world standard: that it is empirically sound and theoretically grounded. Fourth, we need to engage carefully in public debate to ensure that our views are respected as those of experts and not dismissed as personal opinion. Media outlets such as the *Conversation* and UC’s recently launched blog the *Policy Space* provide opportunities to engage publically in a way that is clearly based in research findings.

Finally, following Phillips, I urge researchers on Australian topics to undertake research and publish with neither Cringe nor Strut but ‘a relaxed erectness of carriage’.

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