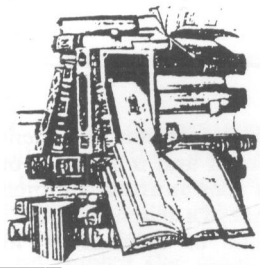

Book Reviews

The Australian Welfare State – Origins, Control and Choices

3rd ed. by M. A. Jones — Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1990. 284pp. $34.95 pb.

The expansion of government in Australia, and its welfare interventions in particular, is surely one of the great stories of the twentieth century. For much of this century, that growth has been the focus of intense and unremitting political and intellectual controversy. This point has been made vividly since the mid-1970's with the rise of economic rationalism and its zealous, even theological anti-statism, which seems to have supplanted the older, milder, liberal-laborist consensus, circa 1945-1975 about the desirability of state intervention in pursuit of a range of economic and social objects.

About the growth of the welfare state two points stand out; it is inherently historical **and** it is controversial.It is historical because it is not a thing but a living field of human action, political choice, mistakes and plans. It is necessarily contingent and controversial. The welfare state is inherently controversial because it is about competing ideas to do with equity, justice, and the role of institutions like the family or the place of paid labor in people's lives. It is also about enormously complex and sophisticated administrative and policy systems. Its actions touch the lives of millions of Australians and it costs a lot of taxpayers' money. It is not something in short which can be easily or simply understood. So it is, as with foreign travel or building a computer, that a good guide book can be indispensable. Michael Jones has produced three successive editions of a book which should be such a guide book. The fact alone of three editions points to the felt need of students, professionals, teachers and ordinary citizens for such a book. Yet ultimately it fails either to be simple or to grasp and represent the historicity and contested nature of the "welfare state".

Admittedly the task confronting a single author grappling with the enormous canvas of historical, intellectual, social, economic and administrative aspects of the welfare state is daunting. Even so, it is reasonable to ask how well Jones handles his task.

To begin with the positive. Jones' book has the appearance and layout of an accessible, even friendly, book. It has a bright cover, photographs (even if they are idiosyncratically chosen) and two column pages of text. It has, especially useful for students, an immense array of "facts" and statistics, all of them impressively up to date, covering the period up to 1988. It is also testimony to the immense breadth of Jones' reading which surveys a vast field of scholarship. It is also generously synoptic in its coverage, surveying the history of state provision, as well as digging down into comparative policy analysis and specific areas of policy including health, employment, the social security system, poverty research, family policy, and the debates about fiscal crisis, and the containment of dependency.

Yet, ultimately, many of these strengths become the book's undoing. It is one of those books which Dickens' Mr Gradgrind would have insisted his pupils devour. Yet the floodtide of facts, tables and statistics (some 243 tables and figures for 254 pages of text) is overwhelming finally, rather than illuminating. Given the enormous range of reading involving the ransacking of nearly 700 journals, books, reports and government publications, worthy of an eighteenth century **encyclopèdiste**, all of this effort ends up issuing forth in a kind of polymathic perversity.

For what seems to engage Jones' attention is the detail, presented with industry, endurance, even athleticism. The result is a vast magpie-like horde of bright and glittering facts and observations spilling in profusion out of every page. Yet this is done at considerable expense to coherence and to careful argument. For a text ultimately intended primarily for an audience of students, the text fails to work at the level of an intellectually coherent introductory text.

The signs of this are everywhere apparent. Chapters end without summaries or conclusions and frequently with points being made, the purpose of which are not always made clear. See, for example, p.239 in which the final paragraphs shift in an odd way from a discussion of day care options for Australian children to a final paragraph on Japanese family based care of the aged.

It becomes, finally, very difficult to discern clear and coherent theoretical arguments which organise the wealth of ideas and information. Basic issues such as what is a "welfare state" and how we distinguish between small scale or large scale welfare states are never elucidated. The result for the reader is a text which invokes constant intellectual vertigo. To take an example chosen at random (p.47), we are told that Australia is a "middle range welfare spending nation". This comes after an introduction in which we are told that since 1973 Australia has had a "large scale welfare state", and just after p.46 where we have been told that Australia has always been regarded as belonging to the "low spending group" of welfare states. This last point is confirmed by table 3.8. The table indicates that, of nations ranked by proportion of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) spent on social expenditures, Australia belongs to the bottom group of nations which spend less than 20% of GDP, compared with nations spending between 20%-30% and those in the group spending more than 30%. Finally, back on p.47 we are referred to the notion that an "increasing level of

litigation ... is one explanation of the welfare explosion" which is then the prelude to a somewhat misleading discussion of the so called "Greek welfare fraud" case. In this case, Jones i) fails to say the case against Greek doctors and social security clients was a legal furphy, (ii) fails to provide any evidence that there is increasing litigation, and (iii) fails to show how this alleged litigation leads to the alleged welfare expenditure explosion.

On almost every page there are odd or mystifying connections drawn which often left this reader gasping. Equally on the broad front, there is little attempt to sustain an overriding framework that is analytically compelling. The introduction which attempts to sketch out some six broad themes is not taken up systematically and used to develop a framework for the book. And claims that social policy or the welfare state has failed to solve the basic problems of social dependency, such as poverty or unemployment, because the social sciences have failed to provide solid research or theory are gratuitously silly. Tens of thousands of studies on poverty, homelessness and unemployment have always pointed to the problem, ie, the ways in which we organise our lives. The solutions will not be found in more books or reports, but in the political will to change fundamental patterns of social, economic and cultural power over decision-making and resources.

Ultimately this book is full of useful facts and information, but fails as an analytically coherent introduction for those of us struggling to make sense of or change the welfare state.

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Family obligations and social change by Janet Finch

Polity Press, 1989. 269pp. $32.95 pb.

In recent years, the issue of family support for dependent members has become not only a matter of private interest, but increasingly a focus of public policy debate. Although the state has used notions of 'family obligations' ever since Poor Law days, the demise of the post-war welfare state has heightened the importance of understanding what modern families are prepared and able to do for their members, especially the young, elderly and disabled. In this significant contribution to debates on care of family members, British sociologist, Janet Finch, maps a conceptual framework that is firmly based in empirical evidence about patterns of family life in modern western societies. This is primarily the background to her own study of the processes of decision making and experience of caring for relatives, which is to be reported elsewhere, and offers a full and meticulous analysis of the pertinent issues.

She sets as her task clarifying what we know about contemporary kin relationships, especially as they pertain to providing assistance to members in times of need. She therefore focuses on a variety of forms of practical and emotional support that go beyond the immediate household. Finch forgoes analysis of responsibilities of spouses to each other, or of parents to young children, in favour of painting a broad picture of cross-generational and wider kin patterns of interaction and material support. The recurrent themes in the book are to do with distinguishing between evidence of family assistance and the reasons for it being given, the complexity of the interaction between social expectations of appropriate kin support and actual family processes, and the role of the state in building certain notions of family obligations into social policy. Each of these is addressed with attention to class, gender and ethnic variations in view of Finch's argument that the patterns of family support, in modern Britain at least, are fluid and negotiable, yet also very much a matter of socially structured behaviour. Chapters overview the evidence from research on family support for adults, historical changes in such patterns, the economic and demographic influences on them, and the role played by the state through institutionalising concepts of family obligation in law and public policy.

The discussion here draws together a wide range of related literature, but it is in the last three chapters that Finch's own perspective becomes more established. Her central argument is that, to understand how family obligations get 'worked out' in contemporary society, we have to use a sophisticated framework that recognises the interaction of material interests with normative guidelines about what is 'the right thing to do' in particular situations. Using insights from several social theorists who have tried to explicate the relationship between individual behaviour and social constraints, Finch explores the ways in which people use skills of negotiation to provide care and material support when they are able to do so, and the expectations, particularly of women, that shape the range of choices available. The 'sense of obligation', she argues, is quite personal in its application, and based on life history and circumstances rather than on abstract moral considerations about 'duty'. Assumptions about the role of the family, usually meaning women, in providing care within a community framework therefore provide a singularly inappropriate basis for social policy.

This is the most important implication of the analysis provided here, and it is disappointing to find it so turgidly dissected that its real impact may be missed. The writing style, especially the very careful review of other people's research and of various theoretical debates, makes this book a solid sociological text. Unfortunately, it also tends to weight down the