



Varied viewpoints on participation in society

JOURNAL

GRIFFITH REVIEW. Participation Society.

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Reviewer: STEPHEN SAUNDERS

The quarterly *Griffith Review* employs different styles of writing and imagery to foster “iconoclastic and non-partisan” discussion of a topical theme. Editor Julianne Schultz, energised by Barack Obama’s innovative and networked presidential campaign, declares here a “new era” of participatory politics and society. Her star contributors include high-profile “exes” – politician Cheryl Kernot, public servant Peter Shergold and publisher Hilary McPhee. She also finds room for lesser-known commentators with interesting viewpoints that might not otherwise get broadcast. With their varied backgrounds the contributors bring in a diversity of topics. Their Participation Society takes in matters of community, citizenship and consumerism, social enterprise, politics and economics, history, public administration, and the media.

We hear more these days about the “third sector” – roughly the not-for-profits and non-government organisations collectively. Kernot wants to distinguish these from the social enterprise space, which is less welfare-oriented and more about “sociality, innovation and market orientation”. This to her implies the creation of lasting jobs and incomes that address social and community problems, but are directly owned by those involved.

Kernot lauds successful British examples of social entrepreneurship, also the micro-loan philosophy of the Grameen

Bank in Bangladesh. In her mind, Australia has slipped from its 19th-century status as social laboratory for the world. It suffers “social market” failures in affordable accommodation and child care, fair access to finance, jobs for Aborigines, and opportunities in renewable energy. Instead of the cautious Howard or Rudd approaches, she challenges, how about a very large Social Investment Fund?

Where Kernot is heartfelt, Shergold confidently backs the virtues of contestability in policy advice and in “co-producing” community services. But there are much larger question-marks over the Job Network model than his former department’s micro-management of the contracts. A version of Shergold’s piece ran alongside a Marian Sawer essay in this newspaper’s *Public Sector Informant*. She reminded us that the genuine value of community engagement is undermined, if the punters suspect that government’s real dialogues and deals always remain with the big interest groups.

If Sawer’s politely sceptical view of community engagement is not quite represented here, see instead Mark Hopkinson’s politely sceptical view of consumer democracy. “The idea that it is the primary function of elected governments to raise the disposable income of their citizens,” he begins, “is the great unwritten understanding of Western democracy.” But this understanding, he argues forcefully, is an accidental and temporary societal settlement rather than the lasting triumph of economic man.

Also of interest is John Keane’s take on what he calls monitory democracy. By this he means the many new forms of extra-parliamentary scrutiny which have mushroomed since 1945 – the new types of boards, councils, assemblies, vigils, and summits for the benefit of citizens, consumers, integrity and human rights. He

believes these innovations, if not levelling the citizen playing-field, bring us the “deepest and widest” democracy. His idea of “monitors” leaves in the traditional media and newer forms of electronic media – but many of the world’s poor lack phone or internet access.

Illustrative of Keane’s topic is Anne Coombs’s piece on cyber-activism in America’s MoveOn and its Australian analogue GetUp! She believes that GetUp! niggled the consciences of Howard-era MPs about the morning-after pill, ABC funding, and asylum-seekers. Author and activist Susan Varga is also convinced the grassroots response helped to turn around our asylum-seeker system. Her watchwords for the successful 21st-century citizen campaign are found not in ideology but in “flexibility, informality, sophisticated use of the email and internet, constant contact to keep people motivated”.

Historian Ann McGrath writes expertly about the intersection of Australian history and Australian media. I would have liked less from her about Baz Luhrmann’s *Australia* movie and more about Rachel Perkins’s landmark TV series *The First Australians*. Not getting a clear line of argument from Hugh Mackay’s “Real Communities”, I did get a clear picture from Hilary McPhee’s memoir of a poor Jordanian community. As a frequent shunner of street-magazine sellers, I am chastened by Alan Attwood’s humane stories and photos about *The Big Issue*. But once you take out Attwood and McPhee, the memoir section is weaker than the essay or reportage sections.

Modest but courageous in style, *Griffith Review* is less slick but more inclusive than, say, a magazine of ideas like *The Monthly*. Check it out in print or online.

Stephen Saunders is a Canberra reviewer.

Star contributors: Cheryl Kernot and Peter Shergold.

