

Cradle of Australian Political Studies. Sydney's Department of Government

by Michael Hogan. Connor Court 2015, 296 pp,
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In what comes through as the desire to give back to an organisation with which he has been associated since 1967 – and to mark the centenary of the establishment of the Department in 2017 – Michael Hogan has produced a reflective and insightful read, particularly for those of us who are products of the University of Sydney's Department of Government. The book documents the development of the academic study of government, the contribution of the various individuals that made it happen and the pressures over time on the institution that was, arguably, first to house it. It shows the signs of trained and disciplined researchers such as Hogan and his long time colleague, Michael Jackson, but is nicely sentimental in parts with a collection of photos of staff from the 1970–80s, including one of departmental stalwart and scholar Ken Turner in what is captioned his 'post-prandial glow'. In tribute, there is an honour roll with a list of Departmental staff from 1917 to 2014 and those who worked or studied there who went on to become professors. There is also recognition of certain graduates who pursued careers in the government sector such as NSW Legislative Council Presidents Meredith Burgmann and Don Harwin, former NSW MPs and Ministers, Rodney Cavalier, Michael Knight and Terry Metherell, Managing Director of the ABC, Mark Scott, and psephologist Antony Green, to name a few. This is a nice touch. Any sensible salute to the Department should lay claim to those graduates who chose to work 'in the industry' as a measure of its success.

The book also stands as a chronicle of institutional change reflecting (or, indeed, influencing, depending on your take) broader social change over the decades. It plots the growth in demand for higher education and, bringing with it, a more diverse range of students. The effects of the post-war period, abolition of fees, increased rates of participation of women, opening up to older students and – with mass immigration from the 1950s – groups of students from varied social-economic backgrounds. More recently also – from the late 1980s – the 'corporatisation' of universities as changes in government policy required of them the need to serve a wider audience and in a different way.

Within the Department under this latter shift, many remained loyal to 'the brand' but critical of the methods:

...[W]e've fallen into a culture of hyper-competitiveness where universities are regarded by their managers and governments essentially as competitive firms

competing with each other for resources, rather than what's the reality, which is a knowledge system based on cooperation and sharing (Professor Raewin Connell, 2014 cited on p. 182).

The heady, perhaps easier, days in the Department were in the 1960s and 1970s. There was big expansion between 1963–1966 (p. 85) but not sufficient for all offices to have a telephone which had to wait for the '70s (p.103). Social movements opposing spies, war and nuclear testing, favouring women, gay and Aboriginal land rights were all forces for change and, for the Department, there is no doubt, '...course enrolments were pushed up by the heightened interest in politics...' (p.109). In the chapter 'Real politics in the 1970s', the agony and the ecstasy of the era are recorded. Student participation in decision-making, collective not hierarchical control systems and women's representation on staff, particularly in senior roles.

Into this mix, is the impact on the Department of Government of the destabilising feud within economics over the legitimacy of political economy (PE). I was one of many PE students enlisted at the time to support the proposition that PE was foremost the study of economic systems and not social ones. To no avail it seems. The compromise to this long running and bitter dispute was the creation of a BEc (Soc.Sc.) and a separate Department of Political Economy. The separation remains:

Even within the one faculty the Department of Political Economy is located in the School of Social and Political Sciences, not in the School of Economics (p.222).

Cold comfort perhaps for those PE academics who may have changed the organisation's design but not its thinking. For Government too, the dynamic of the period was, apparently, more in the process than in the product and, by the end of the 1970s, staff:

...generally agreed that they were better teachers and researchers than political activists...[and]...if staff were to evaluate their own political performance as if they were grading an academic essay, the result would be a reasonable Credit mark (p.148).

The book concludes, for me, on a mournful note. It describes a Department – indeed, a university – which may have lost its soul. The expansion of digital communication and information systems, coupled with changes to the University's employment conditions of service, has diminished the need for bricks and mortar and the personal interactions that characterised education service delivery for centuries. University ranking, as the essential attracter of research funds, quality staff and full fee paying students, now drives the system. To those not close to it, it is a complex arrangement of performance measures, with world ranking the most arbitrary but giving those rated highly a competitive edge.

Hogan is not drawn on the future of his former Department in the years ahead but he is realistic:

No institutional structure in modern life is guaranteed permanency. This is even more the case in a corporate environment where restructuring and rebranding are major instruments of management (p. 255).

Yet he remains optimistic for the future and the move to the new traditions in academic learning and teaching. I do, however, detect a sense of relief that the drive to meet this challenge rests with others.