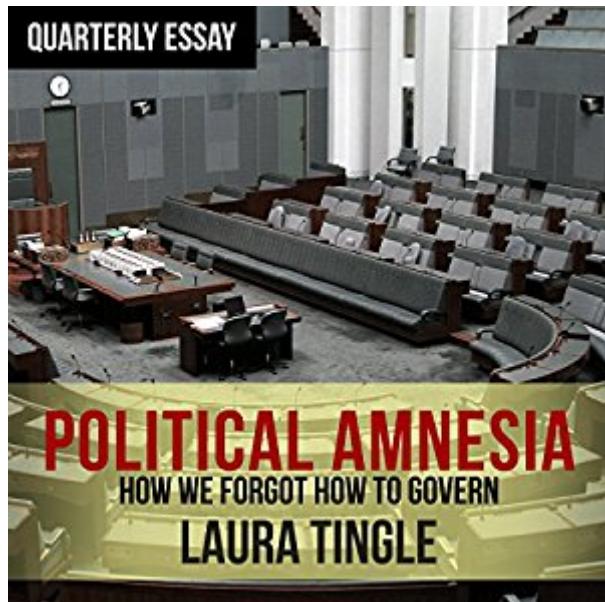


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Quarterly Essay 60: Political Amnesia: How We Forgot How To Govern



Synopsis

What ever happened to good government? What are the signs of bad government? And can Malcolm Turnbull apply the lessons of the past in a very different world? In this crisp, profound and witty essay, Laura Tingle seeks answers to these questions. She ranges from ancient Rome to the demoralised state of the once-great Australian public service, from the jingoism of the past to the tabloid scandals of the Internet age. Drawing on new interviews with key figures, she shows the long-term harm that has come from undermining the public sector as a repository of ideas and experience. She tracks the damage done when responsibility is 'contracted out' and when politicians shut out or abuse their traditional sources of advice. In Political Amnesia, Laura Tingle examines what has gone wrong with our politics and how we might put things right. 'There was plenty of speculation about whether Turnbull would repeat his mistakes as Opposition leader in the way he dealt with people. But there has not been quite so much about the more fundamental question of whether the revolving door of the prime ministership has much deeper causes than the personalities in Parliament House. Is the question whether Malcolm Turnbull - and those around him - can learn from history? Or is there a structural reason national politics has become so dysfunctional?' (Laura Tingle, Political Amnesia) Laura Tingle is political editor of the Australian Financial Review. She won the Paul Lyneham Award for Excellence in Press Gallery Journalism in 2004 and Walkley awards in 2005 and 2011. In 2010 she was shortlisted for the John Button Prize for political writing. She appears regularly on Radio National's Late Night Live and ABC-TV's Insiders.

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Customer Reviews

I must emphasize that I have not read the Kindle version of this essay, only the hard copy, but it is exceptional to the point that it deserves comment. The eponymous "great expectations" of an "angry nation" are identified but Tingle does not dwell upon them. Many Australians already get it - they are irked at a growing focus on personal wealth and comfort, accompanied by a snarling intolerance of social diversity. This 'dumbing down' is best exemplified by the pursuit of smaller government and lower taxation on the one hand, and an expectation that government will resolve all societal ills, including the funding of age retirement, on the other. Tingle examines the nature of Australian governments back to the first fleet, casting into relief their balance between leadership and citizen autonomy, between long term policy and electoral reactivity, and between themselves and their predecessors. This analysis, compressed into 60 odd pages, is as good as it gets. Tingle draws well from the literature and her grasp of Australian history is refreshingly to the point. Tingle is even-handed in her critique. Brevity may have inclined her to don Do Bono's black hat to the point that the some leaders' achievements beyond the economy are barely touched on, such as inspired indigenous reforms or more enlightened understandings of Australia's place in the world, but balance is retained. At the beginning, she frames her question around a personal visit to a well-known retired politician, one whose reputation has mellowed since politics and with whom Tingle claims a degree of empathy. While this visit frames the question of 'expectations', perhaps it is the softener before the killer punch her analysis delivers.

An excellent book (at 25,000 words, I consider it a little long to be referred to as an essay) about a problem that I can relate to because of similar experiences in my day job as an engineer. I'll be recommending it to my MPs. As a result of reading this booklet, I will now be exploring the other "Quarterly Essays".

This article provides good insights into why Australians are the way they are and why they expect so much from their governments. The reach back to the early days of settlement explains a lot.

Tingle offers a brief overview of our political history and a neat summary of contemporary politics. Well worth the (short) reading time.

Enjoyable read, especially interesting on the origins of Australian parliaments and the historical distrust and/or contempt for the political class. A must read for Australian politics enthusiasts.

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