

Similarly, some of his arguments come frustratingly close to the banal—the difference between the availability of consumer technologies in developing and developed countries is most obviously a consequence of wealth disparities.

Furthermore, while reviews have praised the novelty of Edgerton's arguments, *The Shock of the Old* does not represent an advance in the history of technology. The distinction between 'invention' and 'innovation' is a well-recognised one. Indeed, that distinction has become a pivotal point in modern debates about technological change in communications and software industries.

Similarly pivotal is the crucial distinction between the development and diffusion of technologies—or as Edgerton describes it, the difference between a history that focuses on when a technology was invented and one that focuses on when and where it was used. On this point, *The Shock of the Old* is clearly not novel. Technological diffusion is the central issue of the major texts of the genre. How and why the Industrial Revolution began in England is just as much a question of diffusion as it is of invention—European manufacturers in the late eighteenth century were as easily able to obtain English technology as the early English adoptees. Edgerton gives these questions a broader geographic context than Western Europe, but the issues he raises are much the same as those raised by the more seminal works of technological and economic history, and he does little to resolve them.

Diffusion is, for example, one of the core problems for our understanding of economic

development in classical Rome. Roman innovators were able to make some important advances in agriculture, water management, and seafaring, but the limited adoption of their technologies remains striking. For instance, the Roman water mill was tantalisingly close to providing an epoch-shifting economic breakthrough, but it remained limited in use and scope. We can only speculate what such a breakthrough might have meant for civilisation.

Edgerton's book is an engaging and accessible exploration of the core myths of technological history, but is, unfortunately, less groundbreaking than its title implies. *The Shock of the Old* is interesting, but not innovative.

Reviewed by Chris Berg

*Divided Nation?
Indigenous Affairs and the
Imagined Public*

by Murray Goot and Tim Rowse

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It is often lamented that indigenous policy is not an election issue in Australia. But while indigenous policy may not decide marginal seats, public opinion polling on indigenous affairs has played a significant role in policymaking.

The Howard Government's dramatic intervention in the Northern Territory's remote communities, in the aftermath of the *Little Children Are Sacred* report into child sexual abuse, is a case in point. With a federal election expected before the end of 2007, there was much talk in media and policy circles about the intervention's effect on opinion polls. How the public perceived the policymakers' motivations probably received as much airplay as how the public perceived the policy's merits.

But what is public opinion on indigenous policy, and how important is it in deciding policy? This is the question that academics Murray Goot of the Australian National University and Tim Rowse of Macquarie University set out to answer in their recent book, *Divided Nation? Indigenous Affairs and the Imagined Public*.

The authors consider four significant events in the past forty years of indigenous policy: the 1967 referendum, the 1980s land rights debate, the 'Mabo' decision in 1992, and the end of the 'decade of reconciliation'

in 2000. They examine how opinion polls represented public opinion and what part those representations played in the political process.

As the book's title suggests, Goot and Rowse question whether the opinion of the 'imagined public'—a construct of opinion polls and their interpreters—reflects a divided Australian public. The thrust of their argument is that, for the most part, the apparent division in public opinion is a function of the nature of opinion polling. The authors show how pollsters, politicians, and journalists manipulate opinion polls in formulating the questions and interpreting the responses. In addition, they argue that the opinion polling on indigenous affairs left scope for ambiguity because the key notions of 'responsibility,' 'difference,' and 'equality' are open to multiple interpretations within the Australian liberal tradition.

The triumph of *Divided Nation?* is that it busts some longstanding myths about public opinion on indigenous affairs. These myths took hold as 'political orthodoxies' and have been influential in setting the policy agenda over the last forty years. One myth the authors tackle is that the 1967 referendum, which gave power to the Commonwealth in indigenous affairs, was the 'high water mark of pro-Aboriginal sentiment.' Goot and Rowse concur with other historians that the yes campaign did not align itself with any specific direction in indigenous policy, and that a yes vote was therefore not a clear expression of support for land rights. Yet much commentary

in the 1980s would look back on the referendum as a mandate for positive discrimination in the form of land rights.

Goot and Rowse also tackle the widely-touted myth of a 'racist backlash' against land rights by 'middle Australia' in the 1980s. This myth, they contend, was a great exaggeration of the polling results, and ignored the evidence of widespread indifference to, or at least no clear position on, the issue among the general public. Nevertheless, politicians took on the difficult task of 'engaging the uninterested public' based on this myth. The authors go so far as to argue that such 'crusading' was not only unnecessary, but unhelpful, when governments could have been 'taking advantage of the persistently low salience of Indigenous affairs in the public's political awareness.'

Divided Nation? is not without its shortcomings. From a reader's perspective, the opening chapters are cumbersome, the writing styles of the two authors do not elegantly merge, and the meaty discussion lies disproportionately in the closing chapters.

There also remains a question mark over the narrative that the authors construct around public opinion and the notions of 'equality,' 'difference,' and 'responsibility' within Australian liberalism. It is an interesting argument that should have been a major point of discussion but, to my mind, the consideration it receives is too superficial and comes only in the final chapters.

This book makes an important contribution to the literature on the making of indigenous policy, and on the role of opinion polls

in framing the issues and setting the agenda. In particular, the book makes the case for 'a more nuanced view' of public opinion that does not simply pit 'enlightenment' against 'racism.' Indeed, it is welcome to see that the authors studiously avoided the notions that there are 'pro-Aboriginal' and 'anti-Aboriginal' camps of opinion. That those who support a rights-based agenda are 'pro-Aboriginal' and those who support a responsibility-based agenda are 'anti-Aboriginal' is a fallacy that has plagued indigenous policy and one that the authors admirably expose in their work.

As the Northern Territory intervention and the national election played out, Goot and Rowse have provided us with a strong foundation for understanding the construct of the 'imagined public,' and for not giving too much credence to hyped media stories on opinion polls.

**Reviewed by
Kirsten Storry**

