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Advanced Australia: The Politics of Ageing

M Butler. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press. 2015

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Advanced Australia: the politics of ageing by Mark Butler is necessarily broad in scope as he reflects on the multiplicity of issues for older Australians at play during his time as Minister for Mental Health and Ageing in the Gillard Government 2010-2013—issues that continue to occupy the minds of politicians, policy makers and older Australians themselves.

What makes the book different from other coverage of the topics by the Australian media, experts and government are the comparisons between circumstances here and overseas, notably in OECD countries. Butler discusses the economic implications for Australia of the demographics of ageing, both at home and abroad, particularly in East Asia.

There is not only discussion about baby boomers, but considered reflection on the third and fourth ages of the lifespan. The author explores community attitudes to ageing in Australia, including the current impasse spawned by widespread age discrimination, the importance of an active and healthy third age, and older Australians' fears about the quality of their dying and death. He argues that the reactive nature of our health system, built as it is on acute and episodic care, is unsuitable for coordinating primary care in later life and criticises Treasury's accounting methods for not offsetting downstream savings against initial investment, thereby undermining prevention. The book underlines the precarious financial security experienced by at least 10 per cent of older Australians, especially non-home owners and those who have lacked opportunities to build substantial superannuation savings. He argues that the dire predictions of the rising age dependency ratio ignore the contribution of the long and productive third age that Australians increasingly experience.

The author draws on government statistics, some scientific literature and the grey literature to illustrate the arguments being made. These references are cited in a bibliography. Sources of data include the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

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(AIHW). Butler has a knack of making hard data appetising for lay people. He creates a lively narrative by intertwining data from acknowledged sources such as *Intergenerational Reports*, the ABS and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), with feedback from several thousand older people obtained during a series of forums held in capital cities and regional centres across Australia in 2011. In some ways the book is a celebration of his “opportunity to hear directly from older Australians about what they thought the priorities should be in re-designing a decades’ old age care system, and more broadly about ageing.” He has woven an engaging tale about ageing in Australia and, in the process, questioned some myths about the catastrophe many believe it presages.

Butler often interprets Australia through the eyes of average and less advantaged older Australians. In this he leans toward a progressive stance that is grounded on notions of social justice and equality. Some readers with contrasting political orientations or who subscribe to neo-liberal economics may find this alienating. Nevertheless, it is impossible to ignore his sympathy towards the exigencies of life experienced by many older Australians.

This book is written for a wide audience: readers should not expect adherence to all the tenets of academic publishing, which, in this context, would interrupt the easy narrative flow which makes the book so readable. The book could be particularly helpful for someone entering the field of gerontology, as it provides a considered perspective on key topics. We think older Australians, especially baby boomers, will also enjoy this book. The topics covered are not new; rather, in bringing his own personal and political perspective to the politics of ageing in Australia, Butler offers a rarely articulated optimism (heralded by the title) about our ageing population and its positive contribution to Australian society. This approach may help lift some of the burden older Australians are exposed to by the prevailing media negativity.

In summary, the book provides a nuanced, contemporary overview of ageing in Australia. The book discusses relevant issues including demography, economics, health and wellbeing. It is easy to read and would be suitable for both laypeople and professionals from a range of backgrounds.

Dr Helen Kimberley

Principal Researcher, Inclusive Ageing, Research & Policy Centre, Brotherhood of St Laurence

Honorary Senior Research Fellow, School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Melbourne

Dr Jane Sims

Director, Jane Sims and Associates

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Honorary Senior Research Fellow, School of Primary Health Care, Monash University

Honorary Senior Fellow, School of Medicine, University of Melbourne

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Author/s:

Kimberley, H;Sims, J

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