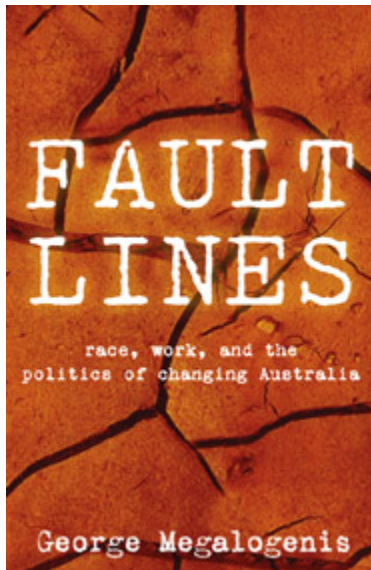


**Faultlines: Race, work and the politics of changing Australia** by George Megalogenis. North Carlton, Vic.: Scribe Publications, 2003, pp. VIII + 215, A\$30.00, paperback, ISBN 1 920769 05 6.



George Megalogenis's *Faultlines* will prove worthwhile reading for those who seek to understand contemporary Australia and the contradictory faces it currently presents to the world. Few political commentators have attempted such a close assessment of the country covering the period since the mid-1990s. These years are now ripe for analysis. In the mid-nineties there was a widespread belief that Australia was profoundly committed to a stable future of multiculturalism, human rights, and social justice and such aspirations survive. But under prime minister John Howard's conservative coalition government that came to power in 1996 these supposedly entrenched core values have come under very considerable challenge. Many small 'l' liberals and people on the left fear the country is heading for an intensification of right-wing and racially charged attitudes. This study by George Megalogenis, a journalist with the *Australian* newspaper, whose parents migrated from Greece in the post-war period, is a timely and acute intervention in the debate on the state of the nation, and the probable trajectory of change in key social areas based on a more optimistic prognosis.

Megalogenis explores lucidly, though necessarily economically, the enigma at the core of recent representations of Australian culture and identity. In the year 2000 people turned out in huge numbers to march in support of reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, in anticipation of a reconciliation statement as the country moved to commemorate the centenary of federation. In the same year Australia hosted the Olympic Games, showing international observers a society in which people of many backgrounds and faiths co-existed in a democratic and tolerant context. It seemed a secure acknowledgement of the end of two negatives that had bedevilled Australia's history: the heritage of settler racism against the first peoples, and the White Australia policy of exclusion of non-white migrants. Both had resulted from strategies politically shaped by the regimes of Labor prime ministers Bob Hawke and Paul Keating. Sadly, very swiftly, new political influences came into play. The year 2001 that witnessed the 11 September terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in New York ushered in fresh initiatives in Australia for which Howard had, one could perceive in retrospect, already laid careful foundations. No apology or restitution to Aborigines eventuated in the centenary of federation year; in November 2001 John Howard won re-election after turning away asylum seekers in the Tampa crisis and criminalising refugees, most of whom were in flight from vicious regimes in the Middle East.

Megalogenis does not pursue this analysis with any suggestion that national identities are simply the outcomes of political leadership (for this reader at least); for conclusions he draws from a wide-ranging examination of trends in key social arenas. At the core of his foregrounding of the Tampa affair and Howard's re-election to a second

term and the aftermath, he discerns significant modifications of behaviour among younger adult Australians that foreshadow yet further change. In particular, he examines patterns of women's access to waged work, particularly of mothers who wish to re-enter the workforce after the birth of children. Even under Labor there had been caution about measures that appeared to encourage women with young children into work, while Howard yearned for the halcyon days of the 1950s when wives stayed firmly behind the suburban white picket fence.

Younger women have acted differently from politicians' expectations, Megalogenis demonstrates. The national census of 2001 indicated that despite multiple obstacles, mothers have been entering the workforce in increasing numbers. Many women now return to work quite soon after giving birth, despite the lack of any comprehensive national maternity leave entitlement or adequate publicly-funded child care. Second generation migrants would also be critical in new solutions to Australia's dilemmas. The same census revealed that children of migrants were becoming absorbed successfully into the workforce; social tensions arising from their presence appeared, if not negligible, also not marked. 'Generation W' is the term used by Megalogenis to denote this emerging group of twenty- to thirty-year olds, both working women and female and male second-generation migrants. 'Generation W' have yet to exert themselves politically, he writes, but it is an incipiently influential middle-class group whose ideas are very much at odds with Howard's dreams of Australia. 'Generation W' will turn around the attitudes to gender and the demographic profile that the conservatives have helped establish.

Political commentators, unlike historians, must face the possibility that events will overtake the focus of their inquiries almost as soon as their work hits the press. But as a prominent journalist Megalogenis's study stands on firm ground. As a journalist he has had access to some remarkably fruitful sources, and his findings provide a far from superficial reading of contemporary Australia. The issues and debates that Megalogenis highlights have not gone away, but become more pressing with time, and he does not leave his readers without a prognosis for the future. If the existence of the new 'Generation W' has not as yet become a household term, this in no way refutes the acuteness of the social analysis he has undertaken. Published by Melbourne's notably enterprising Scribe Press, *Faultlines* is insightful and illuminating reading for all those interested in understanding the dilemmas of current Australian society.

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