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‘James Bennett and David Betts, Marriage Equality and Resurgent Prejudice in Australia’

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James Bennett and David Betts, *Marriage Equality and Resurgent Prejudice in Australia* (Generis Publishing, 2026), 138pp. Paperback. €37.99. ISBN: 979-8-8996-6351-2.

This fascinating and significant book by Bennett and Betts explores the fight for marriage equality in Australia and most importantly compared to much of the existing literature on the subject, also studies the conservative backlash that the successful adoption of marriage equality encountered in the country. As the book highlights Australia adopted marriage equality in December 2017, whereby all Australians could marry, irrespective of gender or sex. However, this followed a bruising campaign culminating in a postal survey undertaken by the government at the time to determine the level of support for the measure in the country. The book focuses on the Australian city of Newcastle and the surrounding Hunter Valley as the former had the strongest level of support: 75% of any non-capital Australian city.

The decision to even hold a postal survey (when opinion poll after opinion poll clearly showed that a majority of Australians were in favour of marriage equality) was a reflection of the Turnbull Liberal-National Coalition government at the time's conservative views and reluctance to introduce marriage equality as they did not think it would go down well in their base. However, the bruising campaign that followed took a huge toll on the Rainbow community (as the authors describe it and I quite like), especially psychologically, as it in some cases tore families apart.

A large part of this was due to the strategy that the 'No' campaign adopted. It knew that most Australians were in favour of marriage equality and so taking a leaf from other overseas campaigns decided to focus on other issues, namely 'protecting' children in schools, adoption, and gender use of bathrooms. So, essentially scare tactics. Thankfully this campaign of fear and division failed but as mentioned above it took a huge toll on the Rainbow community, as defending themselves and countering such scare tactics was incredibly draining and harmful.

One of the greatest strengths of the book is the fact that it also surveys the conservative backlash that the successful adoption of marriage equality in Australia engendered in the country. The right of religious groups to refuse to carry out a non-heterosexual marriage ceremony or businesses to decline to provide goods for a ceremony of that kind became potent issues, where the successive Abbott Liberal-National government, which was even more conservative, went to some effort to defend and they legislated accordingly. Bennett and Betts refer to this conservative backlash as 'resurgent prejudice' and 'reactionary collective action'.

However, the thing that I loved most about the book is the personal dimension. Bennett and Betts as outlined above provide a very useful context to the issues that they explore, but they support this with rich first-person evidence of those who were involved in the successful campaign and experienced the subsequent backlash – so the book adopts both a macro and micro approach (especially in regard to the latter with focusing on Newcastle and the Hunter Valley). Being a part of the Rainbow community myself, I really empathised with the struggle that my fellow people went through to achieve marriage equality and really felt for the toll, especially psychological, that the bruising postal vote campaign and the subsequent conservative backlash took on them.

I very much enjoyed reading this book, despite some of its difficult subject matter. It was very readable, written in a very clear and accessible style – something that I do not ever take for granted, having unfortunately read my fair share of academic books which are so dense and full of academic jargon that it takes so

much effort to just deconstruct what they are trying to say. I thoroughly recommend this book, to both general and specialist readers alike. Bennett and Betts quite rightly stress that the fight for equality for the Rainbow community is not over. I look forward to future advances, and I hope the authors will continue reflecting on it, as they truly have done such a wonderful job with this book.

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