Summary Report for the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia (ASSA)
Sponsored Workshop:

Democracy at the End of the World: New Perspectives on the Politics and Government of Antarctica

Convenors: Professor Robyn Eckersley (FASSA Melbourne), Professor John Keane (Sydney)

Venue: University of Sydney, Friday 14th September, 2012

Social science perspectives on Antarctica remain limited in scope and quantity. In the fields of political science, international relations, legal studies and public policy, there is ample literature on subjects such as governance without government, deliberative democracy, legal post-sovereignty and global democracy, yet research that applies these themes innovatively to the continent's governing arrangements, and their long-term significance for democracy, is virtually non-existent. Antarctica remains an unexplored political space.

The aim of the workshop convened at the University of Sydney (September 14th, 2012) was to explore new ways of thinking about the politics and government of Antarctica. In the opening contribution, Professor John Keane (University of Sydney) explained that since 1945, when there were only a dozen functioning democracies left on our planet, several major transformations have contributed to the global redefinition of the ethos, language and institutional dynamics of democracy as we now know it. The background starting point of this symposium, he proposed, is that political developments in Antarctica are part of this unfinished long-term democratic trend. Although competitive political parties, elections, parliaments and other familiar institutions of representative democracy are largely absent from the continent, it resembles a laboratory in which important political experiments have been taking place that are of fundamental relevance for democracy, and its future.

The workshop partly served as a mapping exercise, an effort to grasp the political history of the continent, and what has so far been built. Professor Paul Berkman (University of California at Santa Barbara), Dr Jean-Paul Gagnon (University of Queensland) and several other contributors addressed a vital question: are the political and legal arrangements of Antarctica relevant for the way we understand present-day democracy and imagine its future? Other symposium participants (among them Professor Colin Wight, the University of Sydney) considered a sequence of fascinating subsidiary questions: is Antarctica a new type of polity, one defined by variously-sized power-sharing mechanisms that ‘enfranchise’ the biosphere through decisions that are subject to public scrutiny and the voting rights of states? What exactly does ‘enfranchising’ the biosphere mean, or entail in practice? In this connection, Professor Berkman, among the world’s leading experts in the field of Antarctica studies, explained how politically important are current efforts to develop the Earth system sciences. In their stewardship of nature, he showed, the continent’s scientists are contributing to the redefinition and ‘democratisation’ of expertise. In their respective contributions,
Professor Colin Wight (University of Sydney), Professor Gillian Triggs (University of Sydney) and Dr Daniel Bray (University of Melbourne) considered whether Antarctica is perhaps the first continent to go beyond the modern doctrine of sovereign territoriality. They suggested that this development openly challenges the widespread presumption that sovereign territorial states are the appropriate 'home' of democracy. Dr Julia Jabour (University of Tasmania) and Mr Tony Press (Hobart) reflected on the long-term political significance of Antarctica's key decision making forum (the ATCM). They asked: is it a parliament? And how important are unelected and extra-parliamentary representatives (such as ATSOC and the Sea Shepherds, represented in the workshop by Jeff Hansen) in the politics and government of Antarctica?

Overall discussions targeted, examined at length and drew conclusions about five broad empirical trends. First: it was shown that the original quest to conquer and 'tame' the continent has been replaced by widespread awareness that humans are stewards of a fragile environment requiring protection and deserving of political representation in human affairs. Supported by the Madrid Protocol, the workshop found, more than a few scientists are now insisting that Antarctica is a vital benchmark that provides practical clues concerning how future generations can reverse the damage to the Earth caused by human activity. Second: participants (among them Mr Bob Brown, Canberra) noted that the gathering sense of danger, the fear that the continent could be reduced to a terra nullius, is linked to a fundamental question: do governing arrangements in Antarctica imply the possible redefinition of democracy, so that descriptively speaking it comes to mean a form of life and a way of rendering power publicly accountable by means of institutions in which humans and their biosphere are treated symmetrically, as equals, as interdependent 'actants' (Latour), in opposition to the still-dominant view that humans are the pinnacle of creation, 'the people' who are the ultimate source of sovereign power and authority on Earth? Third: the workshop participants asked how political durable and effective are the several hundred monitory mechanisms that operate in and around the continent, bodies that range from public declarations, conciliation and arbitration mechanisms, International Polar Year programs, youth ambassador schemes, law panels and councils of scientific experts through to NGO information networks such as the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition (ASOC) and radical direct-action, media-intensive initiatives like the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society (SSCS)? Fourth: consideration was given to the fact that the Antarctic Treaty System is the first-ever binding international treaty to acknowledge the central role of scientists in matters of government. Professor Berkman and Dr Stefan Vogel asked whether this arrangement is having the long-term effect of legitimating the role of scientists as 'watchdogs' of human power and 'guardian' representatives of the biosphere, so contributing in a major way to the redefinition and 'democratisation' of expertise. They further asked: might Antarctica's scientists be thought of as citizens? What exactly are the political roles performed by organisations such as the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research (SCAR), a global body charged with providing independent scientific advice to the Antarctic Treaty System? Finally, Professor Keane and Dr Daniel Bray asked about the long-term political significance of the signing of the Antarctic Treaty and the fact that Antarctica subsequently became the first continent to move beyond the modern doctrine of the sovereign territorial state, so that today it is encased within a tangle of supranational structures (such as a permanent Secretariat and
The workshop paid attention to the growing public relevance of Antarctica, in Australia and elsewhere. Participants sought to make new sense of Antarctica as a political space, but they also targeted the key issue of whether its existing political arrangements can take advantage of the opportunities and survive the worrying challenges of the twenty-first century. The workshop examined several new pressures. Professor Schlosberg (University of Sydney) showed how the Madrid Protocol bans all forms of mining until 2048, yet the continent remains highly vulnerable to corporate market pressures. Other participants noted how the local ozone hole still grows in size; and how glacier outflow rates in West Antarctica are on the rise. Towards the end of the day’s program, consideration was given to the ways in which tourism has become a big business; and to the role played by conflicting practices, laws and jurisdictions in hampering efforts to deal effectively with such issues as bio-prospecting. Jeff Hansen, Bob Brown, Professor Triggs and others noted that the existing governing institutions of Antarctica are insufficiently representative of different social and political interests. They expressed concerns that states exercise too much influence; and they called for giving greater voice to civil society organisations and networks in the local governing arrangements.