While Burke’s road may not be the only way to move forward on community concerns and issues, he demonstrates with many examples how some companies have chosen this route and have been better off for it.

Burke has painted a compelling picture of the future of CSR process and best practice. Whether you see it as corporations trying to co-opt activists or the other way around, if the end result is peaceful win-win resolution of societal conflicts and issues, then that is a good outcome for everybody, shareholders and citizens alike.


Reviewed by Wayne Burns, Director, Centre for Corporate Public Affairs

One of the founding fathers of the United States of America, Thomas Jefferson, said that “every man has two countries — his own and France.” But two journalists from The Economist, who have penned what has been described as one of the best books in print about modern America, say that “Today, every man has two countries — his own and America.”

Followers of US politics and those interested in public affairs and policy will find this book engaging and revealing. It does not attack the Left or the Right in the US, nor does it attack the George W Bush junior presidency. Rather it looks to explain why things are as they are by peering into the various rooms and crannies in the broad church of the Right, and analyses why it has become so successful.

One joke quoted in Right Nation is that once-upon-a-time, the definition of a conservative was liberal with a teenager daughter at college. Today, most of the US electorate is far more divided in its political leanings.

About twice as many Americans now describe themselves as conservative (41 per cent) rather than liberal (19 per cent). This book offers an incisive and considered analysis of what makes American conservatism tick, and how and why its politics are what they are today — traditionally and innately conservative, regardless of whether a Democrat or Republican sits in the White House.

John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, who work in the US and view their subject though a European or ‘international perspective’, observe that the US is the only developed country never to have had a left-wing or left-leaning government. Its brand of conservatism has also kept the nation’s more extreme right wing movements in check and at the fringes, unlike popular far right movements that have populated the political mainstream at various times over the past 100 years in many parts of Europe.

The authors maintain that the US has always been conservative, but that Republicans have morphed from a patrician party of liberal noblesse oblige to ride a rising tide of conservatism, growing in power markedly once the Democrats “signed away the South” following the Johnson Administration securing passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

The two Economist scribes also give their take on why the world remains fascinated by the world’s sole superpower.

“American culture is so omnipresent”, they write, “that everybody has it, as it were, a virtual American buried inside their brains. American power is so overwhelming that people everywhere watch America’s politicians just as closely as they watch their own. And with this familiarity has come a growing sense of powerlessness. People around the world feel that they are citizens of the United States in the sense that they are participants in its culture and politics.”

This book — recommended by a very senior Australian diplomat as a must read for anyone wanting to understand America in 2005 — charts the course of conservatism in the US since the late 1800s. It suggests that the tipping point of the success for today’s conservative establishment occurred in the mid-1960s, when some academics (mostly from Europe!) and think-tanks begun questioning the ability of government to address the most pressing social and economic issues of the day.

Curiously, an Australian lay preacher, Fred Schwarz, is cited as a pioneer of modern US conservatism that has seen Republicans holding the keys to the White House for all but 12 years since 1968.

Schwarz, a former general medical practitioner, left Australia to become a lay preacher and lectured across
the US about the dangers of communism. He established a School of Anti-Communism that the authors say attracted up to 7,000 students during the spring of 1961.

A conservative breed of its own

Micklethwait and Wooldridge maintain American conservatism is a brand all of its own, and would be unrecognisable to Nixon or Eisenhower, in the same way it is not embraced or understood by most conservatives in Europe, whose beliefs are rooted deeply in the traditions of social democratic parties. (Even French conservatives bristled at conservative US radio shock jock Rush Limbaugh when he said of France’s conservative government’s decision not to join the US-led 2003 invasion of Iraq — ‘The French have always been there when they’ve needed us’.)

The writers chronicle how conservative European academics and thinkers after WWII ‘reinvented’ or ‘reformed’ conservatism in the US. Before this time, most Republicans and Democrats happily described themselves as ‘liberals’, though through European lenses, their embrace of the free market, robust libertarianism and evangelical Protestantism, made them anything but liberals in the traditional sense.

The authors describe American conservatism as “a house with many mansions”, a structure that remains rickety and that is not as cohesive or single-minded as most people believe. It often turns viciously on itself. (President Bush’s October 2005 woes with right wing groups around his failed nomination of Harriet Miers to the US Supreme Court is illustrative.)

“Americans who describe themselves as ‘conservatives’, nevertheless, disagree on all of the most fundamental questions of life. Paleoconservatives lament the passing of tradition. Libertarians celebrate capitalism’s creative energy. Religious conservatives want to put faith as the heart of politics. Business conservatives command an economic system where, in Karl Marx’s phrase, ‘all that is holy is profaned’ ... The antitax crusaders ... are populists who believe that point-headed intellectuals need to be given a good ducking. ‘What is the difference between conservatives and cannibals?’ goes one Democratic joke. ‘Cannibals eat only their enemies.’"

Conservatives winning the grassroots campaign

The book concludes that US conservatism has raw power. And it is successful because conservative groups are better at grassroots politics. The foot soldiers of the different tributaries of conservatism in the US are highly motivated and committed. Republicans have marshalled conservative church and religious groups, think tanks and small business organisations and mine their money and volunteers by providing a well-oiled infrastructure and a vent to pursue their disparate issues.

“It is the faith that gets the eccentric army of tax cutters and religious fundamentalists onto the battlefield — and onto the same side ... the members of this army may wear the livery of different causes and disagree about all sorts of things, but they have enough in common to constitute a vibrant political movement.”

In 2004, 1.4 million Republican volunteers, drawn from the disparate streams of the US conservative movement, threw their money, time and fervour behind the Presidential and Congressional election campaigns.

The Democrats and Republicans appear to have locked in and hardened their electoral support at 37 per cent each (based on the 2004 Presidential and Congressional elections). To see how far the conservative movement has come over the past 40 years, in 1964 the Democrats commanded 52 per cent of voters and the Republicans 25 per cent.

Today, it is the 26 per cent of independent voters that the parties are fighting for. The Republicans have appealed to these voters more by being seen as better managing the issues that most influence their vote — national security and moral issues.

The authors maintain though, regardless of whether the Democrats (who have been moving to the Right for decades), or Republicans (the smaller government party who have been the biggest spenders when in the White House over the past 30 years) sit in the White House, US politics these days is “a sport played between the center Right against the Right. From an international perspective, Democrats are now LINO — Liberals in Name Only.”

This, assertion, and some others in the book, will be disputed by many Democrats, as they have been by...
some Washington insiders who have claimed the authors just do not get the nuances of US politics, and like Oscar Wilde, maintain reports of their death are somewhat premature.

But this is a serious book that, although witty and cheeky in places, bases its conclusions on excellent analysis and research. Some of its conclusions and observations are definitely “European”, and would cause Rush Limbaugh to choke on some of his prescription medication. But, if you are interested in government, public policy and public affairs, ‘The Right Nation’ should be a right read for you.