



Percy Herbert Partridge

PERCY HERBERT PARTRIDGE 1910-1988

Emeritus Professor P.H. Partridge – universally known as "Perc" – was born on January 1, 1910 at Hornsby, a northern suburb of Sydney. Like many Sydney born academics of that time, he did not begin with any advantages in the form of wealth or family tradition. Like many another, too, he entered University by way of a selective State High School, Fort Street, then at the height of its reputation. He went on to Sydney University with the aid of a Teacher's Training Scholarship, preparing himself for a career as a secondary school teacher. At the University, he encountered two teachers who particularly influenced him – "Jimmy" Bruce in History, John Anderson in Philosophy. Bruce lectured on Western European History, with particular reference to the Renaissance; Anderson lectured on every branch of philosophy but was also more engaged politically than was then customary. Although Partridge retained a strong interest in history, as is sufficiently apparent in his *Society, Schools and Progress in Australia* (1968), philosophy, particularly social and political philosophy, was to be his life's work.

Graduating with first-class honours in philosophy, he taught in a secondary school until 1934 when he was appointed to a lectureship in philosophy. At that time he was particularly interested in the concept of contingency. A thesis on that subject won for him his M.A. degree with first-class honours and the University medal, the highest degree then awarded in Sydney. He quickly acquired an outstanding reputation as a teacher, over a considerable range of philosophical topics. His interests, however, were shifting more and more in the direction of political and social philosophy. While he continued to be deeply influenced by the political pluralism which Anderson had espoused, once a separate Department of Moral and Political Philosophy had been set up in Sydney it became difficult for him to specialise, as much as he wanted to, within Anderson's department. In 1943 he joined Alan Stout as a Senior Lecturer in Moral and Political Philosophy, his first official step away from 'pure philosophy'.

Meanwhile, he had ventured for the first time outside Australia, in the not very auspicious year of 1939. His studies that year in England and the United States enlarged his range of experience without producing any profound change in the general direction of his thinking, although it did acquaint him with the ideas of Mannheim. An extraordinarily extensive and thorough reading still flowed into his lectures, and his seminars, rather than into writing. "Publish or perish" was at that time regarded as a purely American phenomenon. After all, both Anderson and Stout had been appointed to their Chairs when they had only published one or two articles. To teach well was felt to be enough.

In 1947, Partridge went to Melbourne as Senior-Lecturer-in-charge in the Department of Politics; he returned the next year to Sydney as Professor of Government and Public Administration. That might have seemed to signify a final farewell to philosophy but, to the regret of those who particularly admired

his undergraduate teaching, he accepted in 1951 an invitation to go as Professor of Social Philosophy to the Institute of Advanced Studies at the Australian national University, where he remained until his retirement in 1975. From 1961 to 1968 he acted as Director of the Research School of Social Sciences.

During those ANU years he played a very important role not only in his own University but in Australian University life as a whole. As Universities expanded, he became more and more interested in the implications of this expansion and how it could best be managed. His calmness, his capacity to keep his feelings to himself, though sometimes disconcerting to more extroverted academics, were admirable qualities in a Director, President, or Chairman – when conjoined with the range of his knowledge and experience. He acted, to mention only some of his responsibilities, as a member of the Universities Commission, President of the Australian Council for Educational Research, Chairman of the Academy of the Social Sciences. Elected as a Fellow of the Academy of the Humanities in 1969, he was a useful point of contact between the two academies.

His experiences as a committee member bore fruit not only in his book on Australian schools but in what, to general regret, was his only substantial contribution to political theory, *Consent and Consensus* (1971). That title gave expression to his political and administrative ideal, an ideal which he realised in his own conduct. He never exercised arbitrary power; he secured consent through his patience and good humour. Properly made, in 1979, a Commander of the Order of Australia for his public services, and an Honorary Doctor of Laws in the ANU and of Letters in Macquarie, he did not succumb to the pomposity which sometimes goes with such distinctions, remaining "Perc".

The years after his retirement were sadly darkened by the death of his greatly loved wife Wilba and by ill health. To some extent he withdrew from life and from the company of his old associates. But the six years of his Chancellorship of Macquarie University from 1978 to 1984 were a fitting conclusion to a life devoted to learning and public service.

John Passmore