Rethinking Australia’s 1980s

Wednesday 25 February 2015 4:15–5:30 pm

School of History Seminar Series
Speaker: Frank Bongiorno, School of History, ANU

McDonald Room, Menzies Library, ANU

The journalist and historian Paul Kelly characterised Australia’s 1980s as ‘the end of certainty’ but in some recent Australian political discourse, the decade has taken on many of the features of a golden age. This paper, which emerges from a book I am completing on the history of Australia between 1983 and 1991 – the period of the Hawke Government – will explore some key themes from the period in the context of recent cultural and historical representations of the decade. It will not treat the 1980s as an era in which far-sighted politicians saved the country from mediocrity and Australians from themselves – a broad characterisation that has become almost an authorised version of decade’s meaning among Australian elites across the political spectrum. Instead, I present an era of considerable anxiety about rapid and far-reaching change, as well as sharply contested visions concerning Australia’s identity, economy and place in the world.

Frank Bongiorno works in the School of History at the Australian National University. His most recent book, The Sex Lives of Australians: A History (2012) was republished earlier this year. He has been co-editor of History Australia, the Australian Historical Association’s journal, since 2013.