

## *The Worldly Art of Politics*

By Ken Turner and Michael Hogan (eds), Sydney: Federation Press 2006, xv + 269pp, ISBN 1-86287-615-0

Reviewer: John Carter\*

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Most readers of this journal will be familiar with the series of publications associated with the sesquicentenary of responsible government in New South Wales. This volume is a collection of 22 vignettes spotlighting the contributions of lesser-known but important figures in New South Wales state politics over the previous century and a quarter. Some chapters deal with parliamentary and other institutional operations and practices, but the most engaging chapters are those which describe the contributions of the political ‘fixers’ and those stalwart ‘backstops’ who provide the backbone of experience, toughness and gravitas for any successful government.

The editors have covered a wide spectrum of political representation and interests, and not all can be mentioned in a short review. They include chapters on the nineteenth century labour publicist George Black, and early ‘state socialist’; Arthur Griffith, who as minister for Public Works from 1910 to 1915, put theory into practice; and Michael Hogan’s chapter on Millicent Preston-Stanley which is a reminder, if we need one, that women parliamentarians in New South Wales were rare until only fairly recent times. There are good chapters on the work of contemporary independents, particularly as custodians of parliamentary power and accountability in the face of the majoritarian tendencies of parties in government. For the record, there are brief histories of two of the best known parliamentary committees on Macquarie Street, and an interesting account of the policy making machinery of the Greiner government.

For this reviewer, the highlights of the book, and the chapters which best reflect its title, are those which tell the story of the stalwarts referred to above. They put flesh on the bones of history, with a sympathetic account of several people who lived for politics and for genuine public service. This book is a defence of politics and of politicians, in the face of what its editors regard as a worrying feature of public life today: the erosion of social capital, and the inability of the party system to adjust to concerns by the electorate that the public good is no longer being served. This book reminds us of how some politicians once got some things right.

David Clune’s account of Michael Maher’s career as an assiduous champion of his constituents is a case in point. Maher was known as the ‘minister for bus stops’, and gave unstinting service over nine years to thousands of less than privileged people

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in his Drummoyne electorate. It is difficult not to conclude that Maher's translation to the federal seat of Lowe in 1982 was a waste of his talent. One can think of other MHRs and senators who would make a much more useful contribution in state parliament.

David Clune's account of Reg Downing's career, and Rodney Cavalier's account of the career of Jack Ferguson explain how important are the men (there are no women mentioned among this number) who stand just behind the leader, helping to direct and control the push. They are usually men whose ambitions are apparently fulfilled, and whose personal interests are subsumed in the cause. Both Downer and Ferguson were union leaders of the first rank; both showing remarkable discipline as life-long learners, which in Downer's case resulted in a law degree while he was a minister in the McKell government. Downer is unusual to the extent that he made his career while an MLC, apart from the hurly burley, but winning plaudits from both sides of politics as a man of fairness in procedure and reformist in his work as justice minister. No doubt membership of the Legislative Council left him the time to devote to other political tasks. Downer is described as uncompromising on points of political and party principal, and towards the end of his career capable of holding together the Cahill and Heffron governments at a time when Labor was running out of steam.

Ferguson's time in politics, being half a generation more recent, is more widely remembered. Cavalier's account describes the man and his times, the attitude of unions fifty years ago, and the work of a union organiser then. Ferguson is representative of 'old labor'; a man who honoured his roots. He always sat with the BWIU at Annual Conference even as acting leader of the party. Cavalier's account is one of affectionate recollection, and is the more eloquent for this.

At another level of political practice, Ian Hancock's account of the career of John Carrick as general secretary of the NSW division of the Liberal Party from 1948 to 1971 is also inspiring. The reader must reflect on how so much has changed in the way parties are organised, how electoral campaigns are fought, and how policy is presented. Carrick emerges, as do others described in various chapters, as a man of character and integrity, and in his case sorely tested by life's experience (as a POW) before entering politics. Carrick sought to build the party through the recruitment of candidates who had made their mark locally or whose talents needed to be harnessed for the good of the party. This was in the days before the emergence of a class of managerial apparatchiks and spin doctors employed on large salary packages. Carrick was notably successful, at least at the federal level. Hancock compares his professionalism and integrity with one of his unnamed, over-paid and disastrous successors in the late 1990s. He sums up the stark contrast: 'An ex-serviceman, a member of that generation who served their country in war and came back to do the same in peacetime, (Carrick) gave the NSW Liberals something which no modern package could buy.'

Also on the conservative side, the account of the role of Charles Cutler as deputy premier to R W Askin, and the leader of the Country Party in that coalition which won office in 1965, gives an interesting insight into the importance of personal relationships in the maintenance of a successful coalition. Cutler described to Paul Davy, the author of this chapter, that he and Askin would have a regular meeting before cabinet and unashamedly use each other to plate their own parties. 'I would go back to my Country Party blokes and say I'd love to do what you want but that bloody Askin won't have a bar of it and he would do exactly the same with the Liberal Party.'

*The Worldly Art of Politics* is informative and highly readable, for the most part, thanks to some well-known contributors. It reminds us of the extent to which party political success depends on the depth of talent among players on both sides of politics, and of the fact that the most interesting characters on the political stage are likely to be found just right or left or behind those on whom the spotlight usually falls. ▲