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The Fog on the Hill: How NSW Labor Lost its Way

Frank Sartor, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 201, pp x + 373, rrp \$34.99

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There are a number of facets to Frank Sartor. There is the public image created by his — shall we say? — vigorous personality. There is also behind the scenes the diligent, hard working Minister who inspired respect and admiration. Then there is the side most on display in this book: Sartor the man of ideas and passionate vision. This is not to say that there isn't dogmatism, self-justification and denigration of foes, but this aspect is not predominant. At first sight, Sartor's book is a rather indigestible mix of memoir, insider's account, analysis of the political process, essays on public policy — yet somehow it works. One reason is Sartor's writing style: racy, engaging, argumentative, expository, magisterial. Even the most intractable material is dealt with lucidly. Detailed analyses of complex policy issues are leavened with interesting personal examples and anecdotes from Sartor's long experience as Lord Mayor of Sydney (1991–2003) and State Minister responsible for a variety of areas: energy, cancer research, planning, environment (2003–2011).

The heart of the book is, perhaps, the second chapter where Sartor defines his concept of good government. The bedrock is that politicians should have conviction, commitment and a sound system of beliefs. Good government itself has five key elements: good policy, good politics, good communication, sound implementation and transparency. Sartor is not naïve about his prescription: 'Political compromise is okay, and often essential, as long as we understand the real purpose of any government action — the policy objective we are trying to achieve'. He describes politics as an 'art form': 'The assessment of a good intuitive politician is often worth more than dozens of focus groups'. Sartor argues that under Premiers

Rees and Keneally good government was replaced by a tactical game to keep government. The ‘ill-conceived’ sale of electricity assets, the unchecked blow out in the cost of the solar bonus scheme — both described in devastating detail — and other decisions of Labor’s final years ‘failed the good policy test, represented poor or even woeful politics, and suffered from incompetent administration’.

Sartor also has some forthright things to say about the process of government. He attributes much of the dysfunctionality of the public sector to the pervasive influence of Treasury which he describes as riddled with arrogant ‘pro-market ideologues that have never been in business and don’t understand how the market works’. After the effective partnership of Bob Carr with Treasurer Michael Egan, ALP Governments allowed Treasury to ‘stifle, obstruct, undermine and prevent many initiatives’ and mismanage others.

The Fog on the Hill contains perceptive, well-researched chapters on transport, planning, development and political donations that give valuable insights into what is really going on in these areas. Sartor avoids the approach of some ex-politicians whose books consist of wedges of documents salvaged from the ministerial office linked by a few self-serving lines. Not everyone will agree with his diagnoses and solutions but his arguments are invariably thought-provoking.

The media come in for swingeing criticism: biased, shallow, inaccurate, manipulative, unprincipled. Sartor disparages many current journalists as entertainers rather than investigators who beat up non-stories while missing significant ones. There is a strong ‘Cranky Franky’ side to this chapter — although Sartor does give convincing evidence of the unfairness and inaccuracy of some of the personal attacks on him. Yet, as with this book in general, he has some interesting things to say. The constant obsession of governments with flooding the airwaves with ‘announceables’ to deprive opponents of ‘oxygen’ means that politicians ‘cease to speak about matters of substance and effectively start speaking about nothing, providing pure unadulterated hot air’. Leaders are allocating too much time ‘to selling and not enough to producing good product. Maybe this is one of the reasons why governments are losing the plot and drifting between media hits’. Sartor writes that as Lord Mayor he had fruitful personal contact with the media but as a Minister was insulated by media advisers and scripted announcements. As a consequence, ‘I wasn’t able to develop relationships with the press gallery’. When negative stories emerged ‘they had no reason to believe me. My messages were too filtered and the resultant media reports gave them little weight’.

Not unnaturally, Sartor has plenty to say about the ALP. This is, however, far from being the major theme of *The Fog on the Hill*. It is perhaps unfortunate — if understandable — that the book has been marketed as being about Labor and its current problems (down to the gimmicky title): there is much more to it than that. This part of the book is, in fact, the most mixed in terms of quality. Chapter Three, for example, contains an unnecessary and, at times, inaccurate rehash of early ALP

history. Lang was not, as stated, given control by Conference of MPs' preselections, although his massive personal following gave him much *de facto* influence. There is a rather trite account of the McKell legacy. He did not allow 'control of the party by the unions so long as the unions delivered what the government wanted'. What he did achieve, greatly assisted by the fact that all players had been scarred by the internecine warfare of the Lang years, was a *modus vivendi*, where the Parliamentary and extra-Parliamentary Party (affiliated unions, Party machine and rank and file) respected each others strengths and prerogatives to their mutual benefit. ALP Governments did not, as Sartor says in the conclusion, 'dominate' NSW in the 20th century: they governed for about half of it.

Sartor is more interesting and informative when he talks about the era he knows from personal experience. He disagrees with union dominance of the ALP, arguing that affiliated unions have lost interest in Labor's broad agenda 'as well they might, given they represent only 8% of the voters'. Unions now only show 'any enthusiasm at all' when an issue affects their members in the public sector. Instead of supporting ALP administrations and providing 'the ballast needed to stabilise the Party as it held the middle ground, the affiliated unions effectively became a parasite on Labor Governments'. This disengagement of the unions has allowed Party Secretaries to overstep their role and interfere in areas that were traditionally the domain of Governments. The new breed of Party officials are careerists, driven by 'the motto of expediency, convenience and ambition'. These officials further weakened the ALP by 'outsourcing preselections' to right wing powerbrokers Eddie Obeid and Joe Tripodi. MPs 'served silently, doing only what they were told, waiting for their rewards'. As a result, Cabinet and Caucus 'grew progressively weaker'.

The Fog on the Hill finishes with a long — in fact, over long — chapter on ALP reform. This is the only part of the book where quotes from documents, in this case the 2010 National Review of the ALP, become tedious. Sartor bluntly states that Labor cannot complacently assume its traditional base will return: 'that base is gone. People have moved on economically, educationally and philosophically'. If the Party is to recover from its unprecedented defeat in March 2011 'we have to win the support of a broad coalition from both ends of the political spectrum. We have no choice but to improve the quality of our policies and programmes, avoid wasting public money, and show that we can run government competently, while inspiring people to our cause'.

The final years of the ALP Government in NSW may not have produced much in the way of good government but they did produce some worthwhile books. *The Fog on the Hill* joins Rodney Cavalier's *Power Crisis* as a work that has important things to say about the current state of politics, government and public policy in Australia. ▲