

Carrick: principles, politics and policy

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The conservative side of politics in NSW has not received its due share of academic attention. No definitive history has been published of the Liberal Reform, Nationalist or United Australia Parties. The non-urban conservatives have, in fact, fared best with histories by BD Graham, Don Aitkin and Paul Davey. Essays and theses have been produced about important conservative Premiers such as Carruthers, Bavin and Stevens but none has received an authoritative published biography. Fortunately we now have Graeme Starr's biography of John Carrick, one of the NSW Liberal Party's few genuine heroes. Carrick's life certainly provides rich material: as a young man he successfully launched himself on a business career through talent and hard work, his behaviour as a prisoner of war of the Japanese was nothing less than heroic, he played a major role in establishing and steering the Liberal Party and finally was a senior Minister in the Fraser Cabinet.

Roughly a third of the book is devoted to Carrick's wartime experiences and it makes compelling reading. He joined Sydney University Regiment in 1936 and after the outbreak of war transferred to the AIF aged 22. As a Lieutenant, Carrick was sent to Timor with the ill-fated Sparrow Force. The inexperienced and heavily out-numbered Australians were finally forced to surrender despite mauling battle-hardened Japanese troops in combat. A three and a half year ordeal began for Carrick which included slave labour at Hellfire Pass on the Burma-Thailand railway. In spite of these horrors, Carrick bore no lasting rancour towards his captors, regarding them in their turn as the victims of a system of institutionalised brutality. He described his captivity as 'a great and enduring learning experience'.

Carrick's personal qualities and ability had earned him the respect of the senior officers he had been with as a POW. He re-entered civilian life with bright prospects. Psychologically, Carrick had not been permanently scarred by the war. It imbued him instead with a fervent desire to build a new and better world, both materially and in the quality of its citizens. Like Carrick, many 'ambitious, independent, unselfconsciously idealistic' veterans were attracted to the newly formed Liberal Party: '[They were] convinced that individuals could make a difference and change things for the better. They were suspicious of ideology, collectivist ideas and bureaucratic ways'. Carrick took a 'temporary' position with the new Party as a Research Officer early in 1946 and in February 1948 was appointed General Secretary of

the NSW Division — a post he was to hold for the next 23 years. He was ‘a principal creative force behind the Liberal philosophy, platform and policies and the chief architect of its successful structures and processes’.

Carrick became active in political life in unusual circumstances and was an unusual practitioner of politics. He believed that

the political contest must be about principles and ideas and not simply about power. Equally importantly, he rejected the notion that any worthwhile outcome could be achieved just by outspending your political opponent ... Similarly he regarded it as wasteful and destructive when politics became mired in numbers games ...

Carrick’s definition of Liberal philosophy placed much emphasis on ‘the potential of the individual’. It rejected both *laissez-faire* and collectivism as threats to ‘the development of individual dignity’. Like his protégé John Howard, Carrick saw the Liberals as a Party for Australians of all classes. He had no time for the snobbish conservatism of Sydney’s North Shore. A key Carrick precept was ‘continuous campaigning’. Rather than last minute advertising blitzes, he believed elections were won by an active Party organisation, widespread grass roots membership and continuous transmission of the Party’s ideas to the community.

Carrick became a Senator in 1971. He went to Canberra with a reputation for political astuteness, efficiency, integrity and self-effacement. He was a key Liberal power broker and had been a close confidant of Prime Minister Robert Menzies. The Liberals were still in office Federally and finally in Macquarie Street (since 1965). In 1975, Carrick became Minister for Education, a lifetime passion, and in 1978 Leader of the Government in the Senate. A year later Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser made him Minister for National Development and Energy at a time of world energy crisis. Carrick left the Senate in 1987. In later life he pursued his interest in education at all levels and produced a major report on school education in NSW for the Greiner Government.

A problem with Starr’s account is that he is too inclined to take Carrick at his own valuation. Some objective analysis and assessment of the views of critics would have left Carrick’s stature intact and produced a more balanced biography. The hard, combative side of Carrick’s personality is understated. He could, at times, be dogmatic and a relentless opponent — as NSW Liberal Party Leaders Vernon Treatt and Murray Robson and Country Party Leader Mick (not ‘Max’ as in the text) Bruxner found out. Starr has, however, made a valuable contribution to the study of politics and history with a detailed, thoroughly researched and well written book about a remarkable Australian.