

WILLIAM JOHN MCKELL: Boilermaker, Premier, Governor-General

By Christopher Cunneen, Sydney, University of New South Wales Press, 2000.
xii + 271pp. ISBN 0 86840 587 6.

Reviewer: Rodney Smith *

Supporters of the New South Wales Labor Government's current attempts to rationalise Sydney's local councils might find it depressing to remember that council rationalisation consistently eluded one of the state's more successful ministers and premiers, Labor's William McKell. His 1931 Greater Sydney Bill lapsed after the Opposition in the Legislative Council amended it unacceptably. His attempt as Premier to revive the project during the Second World War did not progress far.

This failure, along with McKell's policy achievements in areas like housing, social welfare, insurance, workers' compensation, conservation and education, is outlined in Christopher Cunneen's new study. His is the first scholarly full-length biography of McKell. It follows Vince Kelly's more popularly-oriented and authorised *A Man of the People* (1971) and Michael Easson's edited collection on aspects of McKell's political career, *McKell: the Achievements of Sir William McKell* (1988). In keeping with these earlier works, much of the tone of Cunneen's book is celebratory. Its celebration of McKell is reflected both in describing McKell's rise from humble beginnings to Australian head of state ('Boilermaker, Premier, Governor-General') and in its belonging to what Henry Mayer long ago characterised as the 'initiative and resistance' school of Australian political analysis. Labor under McKell was the party of positive initiative in NSW, the non-Labor parties those of negative resistance.

Cunneen adopts a chronological approach, beginning with McKell's birth in 1891 and concluding with a brief account of his funeral in 1985. After an interesting discussion of McKell's childhood, two chapters deal with his early working life as a boilermaker and his initial involvement in labour movement politics. The following seven chapters deal with McKell's 30-year parliamentary career as backbencher, minister and premier. Most of the final chapter concerns McKell's activities as Governor General from 1947 to 1953.

Apart from secondary sources, Cunneen draws on archival material, parliamentary debates, contemporary press reports and several interviews, including interviews he conducted with his subject in the year before McKell's death. Cunneen's use of this material does not dramatically challenge previous accounts of McKell's life and politics. He does, however, gently correct some claims made by McKell and others on a range of topics. These include the desertion (not death) of McKell's father in 1901, McKell's juvenile experiences of boxing, his role in the conscription controversy during the First World War and his early associations with radical Labor politics.

* Government and International Relations, University of Sydney.

For readers interested in parliamentary politics, Cunneen's book offers more than many political biographies. It deals with McKell's socialisation to parliamentary life in his twenties, his style as a backbench debater and later as a minister, his support for parliamentary politics and his parliamentary 'social worker' role as the long-time Member for Redfern.

McKell's story is obviously intertwined with the history of the Labor Party in New South Wales. Cunneen applies a solid understanding of NSW Labor's institutions, traditions and factions to events such as McKell's early flirtation with the One Big Union advocates, his relationship with Jack Lang, his interactions as premier with wartime and post-war Labor prime ministers and his acceptance of a knighthood while Governor-General.

Cunneen's account is weaker in its detailing and assessment of McKell's policy record as premier. His government's policies during the Second World War and the post-war periods are dealt with in an *ad hoc* and rather imprecise way. There is no systematic assessment of McKell's policy strengths and failures. Nor is there a serious reckoning of his long-term impact on the shape of NSW public policy in the second half of the century, despite Cunneen's claim that 'McKell's legislative achievement . . . was matched by only a few other premiers, such as Theodore in Queensland [and] was to be unchallenged by any government until Neville Wran's of the 1970s' (p. 191).

On the controversies in McKell's career, Cunneen tends to side with his subject. Accusations that McKell was influenced by money from the liquor industry, for example, are dealt with rather unsatisfactorily. Cunneen initially seems to treat such claims as wowserish slander. He then shifts his argument to one that McKell, indeed, took donations from brewers but only in the same way as his UAP and Liberal opponents did (pp. 183–5). Such bipartisanship is hardly a defence against claims of policy influence by liquor interests.

In a similar way, McKell's rivalry with Lang forms a strong theme throughout much of the book, one in which Lang is consistently demonised (see p. 134). The assessment of McKell's role in the internal party struggles against Lang seems inflated. Moreover, while he registers the many slights Premier Lang delivered on McKell, Cunneen passes briefly over Premier McKell's humiliations of Clive Evatt. The possible psychological links between these two troubled relationships is left unexplored.

This book presents a generally lively if somewhat uncritical account of McKell's life. Given the strong claims Cunneen makes about McKell as Premier, his examination of McKell's premiership is disappointing. The chapters dealing with McKell's earlier years as child, boilermaker, backbencher and junior minister are considerably richer and add much more to our understanding of McKell. ▲