

The Anthony Dynasty[#]

John Kerin^{*}

'Politics in the Blood' is a well researched book written by Paul Davey about the challenges faced and activities of three generations of the Anthony family. Hubert, Doug and Larry represented the N.E. NSW electorate of Richmond in the Commonwealth Parliament for over fifty five years. All were men of and for the times, who adapted to the needs and demands of the electorate as it changed. Due to my own farming and political experience, I can relate to the nature of the electorate in its early days. To this degree the book is about the concept of 'representation' and is a valuable tracing of how today's National Party (and its many name changes) was formed. However, because of the pre-eminence of the three Anthony generations it is more than this as it records some of the more important events of Australian political and policy history. In this sense, one has to acknowledge the high level of public service given by these three men and acknowledge our debt to them, regardless of one's political persuasion or disagreement with their decisions. This book is not about any analysis of decisions taken by the three Anthonys as Ministers.

Hubert (Larry) Anthony was born in 1887, started his working life in the Orange Post Office in 1911 and was initially a Labor supporter. He added three years to his age, enlisted and served in World War I landing at Gallipoli. Surviving the War, he gained a 14 acre banana block at Terranora in Northern NSW in 1919 and from there and through many ups and downs eventually became Australia's largest banana grower and exceptionally involved in civic, agri-industrial and political affairs. His politics reflected coping with the many problems faced by farmers and people in Northern NSW. He diversified into pineapple growing and dairying and eventually owned or leased six properties in all.

The National Party is Australia's most unashamedly (and possibly successful) interest based Party of our three major interest based Parties. To my mind, the National Party is economically populist and socially conservative and has a self-

[#] Paul Davey *Politics in the Blood*, UNSW Press, 2008.

^{*} John Kerin was a former minister for primary industries in the Hawke led Labor government. He has continued a keen interest in all things political, in environmental and agricultural issues in particular.

assurance (or arrogance in Queensland) because of the strength of its core support base of farmers and graziers and the more conservative beliefs of its non-metropolitan constituents. Major elements of the National Party have never accepted the idea that when in government, you govern for all. In the rare times that the National Party has found itself in opposition at the national level it has strenuously fought the advantaging of others in our society. While the National Party closely understands agricultural and rural politics better than other political Parties, it has also had to adapt to some of the fiercer, self-interested elements in the 'Bush' to maintain support. The book records much of this and particularly the number of times that the National Party stood up to its Liberal Coalition 'partner' and dug in on issues crucial to its own or perceived interests.

Hubert won Richmond first in 1937 defeating three other Country Party candidates and a Labor candidate — he was never bested again until his death in 1957. The Country Party did not pre-select only one candidate for a seat at the time. In Parliament, he quickly became an outspoken and effective Member in putting forward the needs and demands of his electorate. The low price of butter and the desire to prevent the production of margarine were among some of his many key concerns. He became a Minister first in 1940 and had six portfolios, 1940–41, during the 'rocky time' that saw Robert Menzies resign in late August 1941. To add to his woes, his wife died in 1941. Post WW2, he pushed for increased agricultural production to export, particularly to Great Britain at a time of its great need for such assistance with food provision.

Expansion of the numbers in Parliament prior to the 1949 election saw the Liberals suggesting amalgamation of the two Parties to combat Labor. The National Party agreed to limit three-cornered contests. Nothing much changes. The National Party also promised a guaranteed minimum price for butter via subsidies as the State Governments could not agree on what could be done for a desperately troubled dairy industry.

In 1949 Hubert became Post Master General to which was added Minister for Civil Aviation in 1954. The PMG was Australia's largest employer at the time. He became the Minister that brought in the eventual introduction of TV and what became known as the 'two airline' policy. How this all came about is a book in itself-TV was seen as a corrupting influence by conservative politicians and the airline policy took an incredible degree of negotiation. One of the first large clashes with the Liberal Party was when PM Menzies wanted to revalue the pound in 1950–51 as a result of the sudden increase in wool prices. After threatening to resign from the Government, the then Country Party settled on a Wool Sales Deduction Scheme whereby 20% of the value wool sold and exported was paid to Treasury and held as a credit.

The two most powerful Commonwealth Country/National Party Ministers of all time were John McEwen and John Douglas (Doug) Anthony. Doug was born in December 1929 to Hubert and he proceeded to become a successful and astute

farmer. He spent a lot of time in Canberra while his father was in the Parliament and has known 16 Prime Ministers. Doug was educated at the Kings School and Gatton Agricultural College and was also a member of the Queensland Rugby Union team. Farming and sport; what could be better? He too diversified the farm holdings into horticulture and piggeries. He became very much aware of and outspoken about the corrupting influence of subsidies and consequent over-production and dumping on world markets, following a visit abroad in 1954.

Doug was a reluctant candidate to follow his father and had only just married Margot Budd. At 27 years of age, he won the bi-election with 49.82% of the vote against three other Country Party candidates and one Labor on 14/9/57. He then settled down to the disruption, and at first boredom, of a Canberra Parliamentary and between times, happier Murwillumbah life. His first speech was against devaluation. He regarded it as a 'dreaded snare and delusion'. He was made Minister for the Interior in 1964 and at last had a bit more to do, given that the Department had 11,000 staff and effectively ran Canberra as well as performing many other functions. With a young family, he made the sensible decision to move to Canberra to live there for a large part of each year. He became a very effective Minister. In October 1967 he was elected as Deputy Country Party leader and became Minister for Primary Industry. One of the first challenges to the Country Party Ministers was the wish by the Liberals and Treasury not to follow the UK's devaluation of its currency in November 1967. The Country party negotiated 'devaluation compensation' for its farm exporting constituency. It is well to remember just how much of our then balance of trade was due to farm and rural exports.

Anthony immediately faced some immense challenges as Minister with a too high Guaranteed Price for wheat which had induced a large increase in production at a time of a slump in world prices. To address this, a wheat quota scheme was introduced. The dairy industry continued to be in crisis and a Marginal Dairy Farms Reconstruction Scheme was introduced. Wool too was in great trouble and there had been two grower referendums where growers had determined that they wanted to continue with the free auction system. Anthony put in place the Australian Wool Commission to manage a flexible price scheme (in effect a buffer stock scheme) to operate independently from the Australian Wool Commission. These three issues alone would have been enough to 'drain' any Country Party Minister. Anthony's statement on the fact that farms needed to get bigger was taken out of context and, politically put into the slogan of 'get big or get out' This is part of adversarial politics, which neither side of politics can resist just as the city-based media cannot resist running the line of a 'hill billy Country Party', not having a clue about the realities of Australia's primary industries.

McEwen was adamant that the Country Party wouldn't serve under McMahon after PM Holt disappeared in December 1967; hence John Gorton became PM, which in turn saw Billy McMahon become PM, (when McEwen removed his veto after Gorton resigned) which in turn saw Gough Whitlam become PM, 1972–75. John McEwen resigned in February 1971 and Doug became Deputy PM, Country Party

Leader and Minister for Trade and Industry. It was in this role that, to my mind, that he served Australia's interests so well, before and after the Whitlam Labor Government. In 1971 the US devalued its currency and the Liberals and Treasury argued for a re-valuation of 8.57% to align with the pound sterling. The Country Party refused to budge, holding out for an increase of no more than 5.2%. After three days of Cabinet meetings, an increase of 6.3% was agreed with the promise of compensation for affected export industries. When in Opposition, with Snedden and Lynch as Liberal Party leaders, no shadow portfolios were allocated to the Country Party-pay back? The Country Party was re-named the National Country Party of Australia in 1973 with the independent State Branches having a variety of names.

An interesting political interlude in the book is how Doug Anthony and Peter Nixon were the instigators of the plot to undo Gough Whitlam's plot of appointing Vince Gair as Ambassador to Ireland!

Anthony, having found that Britain was not intent in honouring its five year transition on preferential trade agreements during negotiations by Britain to enter the Common Market, pursued Britain and the Common Market countries on their Common Agricultural Policy, opened up new Trade Posts throughout the world and gave attention to developing new markets, particularly in Japan, the USSR and the Middle East. Many in the Commonwealth Parliaments and in the National Country Party regarded Britain's behaviour as an act of betrayal. It is salutary to remind ourselves that, for example, butter exports to Britain dropped from 79,000 tonnes in 1973 to 7,000 tonnes by 1981. Anthony picked up the cudgels on behalf of Australia's trade interests in the period 1976-83 working tirelessly and initiating (mainly bi-lateral) trade deals and initiatives such as the Australian Saudi Business Council and Closer Economic Relations with New Zealand. The horsemeat and kangaroo meat export scandal in August 1981 was an issue that he and the Government could have done without. Though I cannot recall having a serious conversation with Doug Anthony during the time we were both in the Parliament, there a few people I have a higher regard for in those Parties opposed to mine.

Having astutely crossed the floor on the 1983 electorate re-distribution, Doug resigned in December 1983, having served longer as National Party Leader than John McEwen and having been in Opposition for less than 4 years out of his 26 years of service. The book not only records the times the National Party stood up to the Liberals but also those instances where Doug Anthony advocated the need for change but could not carry the more vociferous parts of his broader constituency, e.g. on import parity pricing of petrol and attempts to gain a more modern image for the Party. It was the Party's constituents and the impact of John McEwen's policies of 'protection all round' that made it difficult for Anthony to move away from the high levels of protection and subsidisation that Australian agriculture enjoyed but which eventually proved ineffective. He probably just changed his mind on devaluations! Consistency isn't necessarily seen as a virtue in politics. The Fraser Cabinet was somewhat of a farmer cabinet and if there had been political analysis in this book a lot could have been written about the National Party's role in

determining the value of the currency. It is probable that the economic reforms, including the floating of the A\$ of the 1980s would not have occurred had the Coalition won government in 1983.

Charles Blunt won the subsequent bi-election but only held the seat until 1990.

The seat had been changing in its demographics under Hubert and Doug. There had been an influx of sea and tree changers, environmentalists and retirees. It is after all a bit of 'Godzone' and the presence of Lismore and Ballina in the seat has been essential for the National Party's success for most of its time.

Doug's son Larry unsuccessfully ran for Richmond in 1993 but ran successfully in 1996 as the Keating Labor Government lost office. Larry married in 1992 and followed the path of his predecessors in becoming very active in local civic affairs. Larry was not as reluctant a candidate as his father but had to adapt his style and National Party image to a far greater extent than his forebears. However, when running as a candidate in 1993 he spoke against the Liberal 'Fightback' election policy of a reduction in sugar tariffs, which was a concern of his would be cane growing constituents. He was a university graduate and worked as a financial consultant and international investment banker with Potter Warburg and Merrill Lynch, respectively, from 1985 to 1991. He and his father also became active in farming outside of the electorate and in a local tourist enterprise.

Campaigning in the 1990s and 2000s was far different to earlier times and the Anthony campaigns now had to be more 'media savvy' and take into account modern campaigning methods, which Larry Anthony rapidly adapted to. After five years of campaigning he entered Parliament and became active on Committees. In the 1998 election Larry Anthony only scraped back in due to the problem of the simplistic if not 'racist' charm of the One Nation Party, which polled a lot more strongly in conservative seats. In 1999 he was appointed Parliamentary Secretary for Trade and Minister for Community Services after National Party Leader Tim Fischer stepped down. This portfolio is part of the Department of Family and Community Services, which spends 33% of the total Commonwealth Budget. It was a very important Ministry but Larry underwent quite a few challenges as the Howard Government tightened up on welfare payments, some of which adversely affected the electorate of Richmond. e.g. dairy deregulation and GST on caravan parks.

The 'security' election of November 2001 results in another win for Anthony with the National Party shrinking back to 13 seats in the House of Representatives- the Party is now losing to Liberals and 'independents'. Larry is appointed as Australia's first Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and concentrated on a national policy for early childhood. He had some successes in gaining funds for investment in the programmes he put up and a few knockbacks, e.g. testing the health, education and behaviour of children up to five.

Eight candidates stood for Richmond in the election of October 2004 including a person from Liberals for Forests. The electorate had turned 'green' to a large extent and was changing rapidly in terms of a range of issues. Single issue candidates were coming to the fore with some not living in or being part of the electorate. When the count came in, Larry Anthony lost by 301 votes and the Anthony Dynasty ended.

I've long thought that by having a stranglehold on the portfolios of Agriculture, Trade and Transport in Coalition Governments, that the National Party has distorted Australian Government policy. Larry proved, as have others, that National Party people can appeal to broader communities. However, this raises again the issue of whether the National Party and Liberal Party should combine. Doug Anthony thought and thinks so. But the demise of the National Party, that is so often seen as inevitable still seems a way off. In Queensland, the National Party has taken over the Liberal Party-so who knows?

It is to be commended that Paul Davey writes on the service of the personal staff, secretaries and electorate people who worked so hard with the Anthony's over the years. Few people realise the extent to which these people are owed a debt when their employers are Ministers; they carry a heavy load in having to deal with constituents, particularly once a seat becomes marginal. ▲