
Neville Wran. Australian Biographical Monographs No. 5, by David Clune. Cleveland (Qld): Connor Court Publishing, 2020. pp. 80, Paperback RRP \$19.95 ISBN: 9781922449092

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It's been many years since I've thought about Neville Wran, so I came to this monograph with an open mind, limited by two personal judgements. The first was the belief that Wran was a giant of his time, a real leader and moderniser. The second was the tragedy (farce) of his last years. It was a reminder to us all that there are no guarantees that a great life will be rewarded with a kind death: for Neville Wran that was certainly not the case.

Luckily, now with time we remember his leadership, his modernising policies and his largely successful ability to dominate an extraordinarily powerful political party with its deep factions. David Clune's monograph, through the use of first-hand materials and comments from Wran's colleagues, takes us through Wran's rise to power, his successes as Premier and his fall via the web of corruption and scandal that ended his premiership.

Clune's narrative is clear and remarkably free of value-judgements. It reminds us just how moribund the politics and Parliament of NSW were at the time leading up to Wran's Government and of all the talent Wran brought with him, which transformed NSW politics, policy and Parliament. Of course, there were failures; things left incomplete and the embedded corrupt culture of NSW politics largely ignored. Nonetheless, in this monograph we gain a picture of an extraordinary man leading Australia (via NSW) into the modern era.

I hope this monograph encourages others, as it has done for me, to go back and find earlier biographies of Wran to fill out the picture. Indeed, the very first paragraph drives me to find out more: how did Wran's mother Lilly manage to raise eight children, of whom Wran was the youngest, in Balmain during the depths of the Depression? How did she inspire him towards education?

The second paragraph reminds me of the gigantic contribution that the selective public high schools (in Wran's case, Fort Street) made to Australia, giving children from working-class backgrounds access to the best education and a route to university.

The list of those who so benefitted is quite extraordinary. I looked up Fort St alone. Here is a taste just from politics and law—and the list is incomplete:

- Sir Garfield Barwick, Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia
- Eric Bedford, NSW Government Minister and Member of the NSW Legislative Assembly
- John Bryson, Justice of the Supreme Court of NSW
- Sir Joseph Carruthers, Premier of NSW
- Rodney Cavalier, NSW Government Minister and Member of the NSW Legislative Assembly
- Ian Cohen, Member of the NSW Legislative Council
- Terence Cole, jurist, twice Royal Commissioner (AWB Oil-for-Food and Building Industry)
- John Dowd, NSW Attorney-General, Leader of the Opposition, Justice of the Supreme Court of NSW, Chancellor of Southern Cross University
- Syd Einfeld, Deputy Leader of the NSW Opposition, NSW Government Minister and Member of the NSW Legislative Assembly
- Bob Ellicott, federal Government Minister, Solicitor-General, Attorney-General and Justice of the Federal Court
- Sir Kevin Ellis, Speaker of the NSW Legislative Assembly
- Dr H.V. Evatt, Justice of the High Court, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of NSW, President of the United Nations General Assembly, federal Opposition Leader
- Clive Evatt, NSW Government Minister and Member of the NSW Legislative Assembly
- Sir David Ferguson, Justice of the Supreme Court of NSW
- Graham Hill, Justice of the Federal Court of Australia
- Michael Kirby, Justice of the High Court of Australia

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- David Kirby, Justice of the Supreme Court of NSW
 - Sir John Kerr, 18th Governor-General of Australia, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of NSW
 - Trevor Morling, Justice of the Federal Court, Royal Commissioner and chairman of the Australian Electoral Commission
 - Lerryn Mutton, Member of the NSW Legislative Assembly
 - Max Ruddock, Government Minister and Member of the NSW Legislative Assembly
 - Harold Snelling, NSW Solicitor-General
 - Sir Percy Spender, diplomat and jurist, President of the International Court of Justice, federal Government Minister
 - Sir Bertram Stevens, Premier of NSW
 - Stanley Stephens, Government Minister and Member of the NSW Legislative Assembly
 - Sir Alan Taylor, Justice of the High Court of Australia
 - Allan Viney, Member of the NSW Legislative Assembly
 - Sir Robert Wilson, Member of the NSW Legislative Council
 - Neville Wran, Premier of NSW.

We lost a great deal as a society when, in the perverse name of egalitarianism, we gave up the notion of giving scholarships to allow children of talent from poor families to attend elite selective high schools and access the very best education and educators available.

To return to Clune's monograph, he draws a lively picture of Wran's intra-party battles and his networks of friends and enemies, reminding us that Wran was true to the great Labor tradition of being a 'great hater'.

Many of the policies introduced under successive Wran governments were good old-fashioned Fabian-style bread and butter reforms to help the working class: cutting public transport fares, limiting local government rates rises, a Lands Commission to deliver blocks of land to first home buyers at affordable prices, and protection of tenants through the establishment of the Rental Bond Board.

Other policies heralded a 'new world': the *Anti-Discrimination Act*, The Ethnic Affairs Commission, a Women's Advisory Council, the Women's Coordination Unit, enlarging

the *Consumer Protection Act*, passing the *Heritage Act*, creating the Land and Environment Court, decriminalising 'victimless crimes', and the introduction of the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act*.

Major constitutional reforms were entrenched in the *Constitution Act*: optional preferential voting, abolishing the weighting of rural electorates, a four year term for the Legislative Assembly, and wholesale changes to the Legislative Council, which had been a back-water of cronyism and incompetence.

As signalled earlier, there were fiascos. These included electricity shortages and a long battle to modernise the state transport system, particularly the railways, where employment was virtually a protection racket. But it was the corruption within the police and justice system, combined with ambitious men from within Labor eyeing the leadership, that finally destroyed Wran.

In Wran's defence, such corruption existed before he came to power. Indeed, one commentator on Robert Askin's Government, which preceded Wran was:

Development in Sydney reached unprecedented levels under Askin, who ruled until his retirement in 1975. Australian state administrations have long struggled with corruption but NSW was perhaps the worst-affected of all and many believe that Askin's regime deliberately promoted a dramatic strengthening of the links between government, business and organised crime. It is now widely accepted that Askin was one of the most corrupt politicians in recent NSW history. He has been reliably and closely linked with major criminals, oversaw a vast expansion of police corruption, reputedly sold knighthoods for cash, and had intimate connections with the notoriously venal NSW racing industry, including the scandal-ridden Waterhouse bookmaking dynasty.¹

However, Askin 'got away with it' by and large, while corruption under Wran was seen as completely out of control, especially when his Assistant Police Commissioner and friend, Bill Allen, was forced to retire for serious misconduct and his Corrective Services Minister Rex Jackson was imprisoned over allegations of bribery. Under the

¹ Milesago, 'The Juanita Nielsen Case'. Accessed at: <http://www.milesago.com/features/nielsen.htm> . See also Ian Hancock, 'Robin (Later Sir Robert) William Askin', in David Clune and Ken Turner (eds), *The Premiers of New South Wales*, Volume 2 1901-2005. Leichhardt: The Federation Press, 2006, pp. 364-368.

strong leadership of Nick Greiner as Leader of the Opposition, and Wran's lack of interest in handling the issue properly (hubris or boredom?), corruption charges destroyed his Government and led to his retirement.

Wran's legacy remains far greater than his failings and NSW in particular benefitted greatly, leaving the State with refreshed vigour and the benefit of young forward-thinking well-educated minds. It is good to be reminded that great leadership is possible and not everything needs to be reduced to tawdry poll-driven small-minded politics.