
The Secret, by Alexandra Smith. Pan Macmillan Australia, 2022, pp 262 RRP \$36.99, ISBN: 9781761260742.

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The *Sydney Morning Herald's* Alexandra Smith is one of the most impressive journalists covering NSW politics in quite a while. She has now taken on the challenging task of a biography of Gladys Berejiklian, NSW Premier from 2017-21.

Berejiklian's parents were Armenian migrants who met and married in Australia in the 1960s, part of the global diaspora resulting from the Turkish genocide against Armenians in 1915. Her father was a welder and her mother a nurse. The family lived an unassuming life in middle class North Ryde in suburban Sydney. The Armenian community was close-knit, placing much store on tradition, values, family, and religion. Berejiklian imbibed all this, and it helps to explain her strong regard for personal privacy and self-contained inwardness. As a child, she was obviously bright, ultra-competitive, stubbornly determined, and not backward in saying what she thought, all life-long attributes.

Berejiklian attended the far from affluent Peter Board High in North Ryde where she distinguished herself academically and was School Captain. Smith comments:

She worked hard, learned to be self-disciplined, and, crucially, was forced out of her comfort zone and the over protectiveness of her tight-knit family.²

¹ Author acknowledgement and/or declaration footnote.

² Alexandra Smith, *The Secret*. Sydney: Pan Macmillan Australia, 2022, p. 33

Enrolling in an Arts degree at Sydney University in 1989, Berejiklian subsequently completed a Graduate Diploma in International Studies and a Master of Commerce at the University of New South Wales.

Always interested in public affairs, Berejiklian joined the Liberal Party in 1991. She was associated with the left faction in the Young Liberals and in 1996 organised one of the first protests against Pauline Hanson's racist rhetoric. Throughout her career, Berejiklian was committed to LGBTQ rights, anti-discrimination, and the advancement of women – although in the last instance she stated she did not want to 'be remembered for playing the gender card'.³

Berejiklian's factional colleagues could see she had potential with her ability, work ethic, gender, and ethnic background. After polishing up her dour, suburban image, they backed her for Young Liberal President in 1996, a contest she won. Berejiklian worked for Peter Collins, the Liberal MP for Willoughby, an electorate with a high Armenian population, for five years. She then gained experience in the commercial sector with the Commonwealth Bank.

When Collins decided to retire at the 2003 election, Berejiklian won the Liberal preselection to succeed him. Things turned ugly when a substantial section of the local Liberal Party, unhappy with Berejiklian's candidacy, backed the popular Mayor of Willoughby, the convivial ex-Elvis impersonator Pat Reilly, who ran as an independent. She scraped in by 144 votes, a margin she greatly increased at the next election.

In the Parliamentary Liberal Party, Berejiklian's talent and drive led to quick promotion to the shadow ministry. Barry O'Farrell, Opposition Leader from 2004, became an important patron and friend, appointing Berejiklian to the key shadow transport portfolio. When O'Farrell won a landslide victory in 2011, she became Transport Minister, proving to be one of the new Premier's most capable ministers. According to Smith, 'Berejiklian hit the ground running the moment she left Government House after being sworn in ... Her staff say she did not stop for the next four years'.⁴

In April 2014, at an Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) hearing, O'Farrell denied he had received an expensive bottle of wine as a gift. Evidence quickly emerged that his normally excellent memory had betrayed him, and he had. O'Farrell

³ Smith, *The Secret*, p. 161.

⁴ Smith, *The Secret*, p. 68.

called Berejiklian to say he was resigning and urged her to run, which she decided to do. The other leading contender was Treasurer Mike Baird, a good friend of Berejiklian's. Smith claims that Berejiklian had the numbers. However, she unexpectedly withdrew from the race, partly, it seems, because of friendship, partly because Baird was more acceptable to the Liberal right. Interestingly, Smith speculates that there may have been a secret deal where Baird promised to serve three years and then make way for Berejiklian.⁵

Baird proved to be a very popular Premier. However, two disastrous decisions undermined his standing: local government amalgamations and the banning of greyhound racing, the latter soon abandoned. Baird quickly went from being 'Magic Mike' to 'Nigel No Friends'. In January 2017 he resigned and was succeeded unopposed by Berejiklian.

Smith does not devote enough attention, barely a page, to Berejiklian's success in establishing herself as Premier and reviving the Government's fortunes. Wisely, she did not try to create a false, extroverted persona but relied on her positive image as a 'safe pair of hands'. Lacking the charisma of her predecessor, she had to convince the voters that she was trustworthy, competent and sensitive to their needs. She also had to stabilise the Government and show that it still had purpose and dynamism. The Government's re-election in March 2019 showed that she was extremely successful in meeting these challenges.

Smith gives interesting insights into Berejiklian's work habits as Premier:

Berejiklian's defining characteristics as a boss were her commitment to the trusted few in her inner circle and her insistence on micro-managing ... Nonetheless, her office ran like a well-oiled machine, and her staff said Berejiklian signed off on all correspondence in her in-tray regardless of how insignificant it was ... Staff would fill her in-tray with briefs at the end of the day, and she would work back in the office until she had worked her way through them all ... Berejiklian

⁵ Smith, *The Secret*, pp. 77-79.

*was renowned for her frenetic energy, her ability to exist on very little sleep, and her supreme organisational skills.*⁶

For the last years of her term, Berejiklian was preoccupied with crisis management: the catastrophic 2019-2020 bushfires and the COVID pandemic. Smith says of the latter that Berejiklian was 'lauded in Federal politics and business as the leader who kept the country afloat during its darkest hour outside wartime'.⁷ This is an exaggeration of the significance of her role. However, she emerged from both crises with enhanced prestige. Berejiklian displayed leadership and resilience in adapting to changing circumstances. Importantly, she was able to communicate to ordinary citizens a sense of steadiness and purpose that gave them confidence to see the tough times through.

Two of Berejiklian's strongest character traits, obsessive secrecy and stubbornness, contributed to the end of her political career. ICAC was investigating the activities of disgraced former Liberal MP for Wagga, Daryl Maguire. Berejiklian appeared as a witness on 12 October 2020. In an astonishing disclosure, the Premier admitted she had been in a 'close personal relationship' with Maguire from 2015 which had only recently ended. Previously, the public perception of the private Berejiklian was that of a rather prim career woman wedded to her job.

On 1 October 2021, ICAC announced it was expanding the scope of its investigation into Maguire to include Berejiklian. Realising her position had become unsustainable, she resigned as Premier the same day. Key lines of inquiry concerned whether Berejiklian had breached the ICAC legislation by failing to report corrupt behaviour by Maguire and whether she should have disclosed the relationship under the Ministerial Code of Conduct. The subsequent evidence at the ICAC public hearings did not look good for her.

Smith handles the ICAC hearings well, making it clear how excruciating it must have been for someone as private as Berejiklian to have her personal life exposed in public. Yet the former Premier did not help herself. At the cost of some short-term personal humiliation, she could have declared the relationship and still been in office. Instead of stubbornly denying any impropriety, Berejiklian would have been wiser to take a more conciliatory line before ICAC, perhaps even admitting she had acted wrongly.

⁶ Smith, *The Secret*, pp. 221-23.

⁷ Smith, *The Secret*, p. 181.

The Secret is a welcome contribution to the literature on NSW politics – although it is unfortunately flawed by the lack of references and an index. It is a readable, well-researched book that gives new insights into Berejiklian and her time in office. Although Berejiklian did not co-operate, believing the book would be a ‘political hit job’, it is a fair and balanced account of the career of ‘a hugely talented woman who, like the rest of us, is flawed’.⁸

⁸ Smith, *The Secret*, p. 261.