
BOOK REVIEWS

Paul Davey

The Nationals: The Progressive, Country and National Party in New South Wales 1919 to 2006

The Federation Press, Sydney, 2006, 530pp.

Reviewed by Evan Jones

The Nationals is part of a series spawned by the celebration of 150 years of ‘responsible government’ in New South Wales. The book has all the hallmarks of an official history – minutiae of institutional development, of possible interest only to those associated with the organisation in question. But this minutiae does expose the collective commitment necessary to keep such an organisation going, especially in a changing environment.

That the Country Party survives is something of a miracle. A considerable proportion of its energies has been devoted to fighting with, and staving off absorption or annihilation by its Coalition partner on the Right side of politics. Add the energies devoted to fighting electoral redistribution, that harbinger of the relentless relative decline of the rural-based population.

The Party seems to have got by on the metaphorical smell or an oil rag; and the distances involved in communication and electioneering would quickly exhaust most urban political machines. The Party’s first 30 years were essentially sustained, both organizationally and financially, by the lobby groups representing the small and big of rural Australia – the Farmers and Settlers’ Association and the Graziers’ Association. Locally owned media were an important source of support, but the 1960s onwards saw the swallowing up of local media by media giants, marginalising local voices. In particular, *The Land*, established by the FSA in 1911, is now owned by John Fairfax’s Rural Press. The paper, the rural sector’s most important media outlet, is now essentially advertising-driven and its coverage of vital rural issues is bleak.

The well known names of the Country Party are those that have strutted the federal stage, and where Coalition governments have been in office for longer periods than in NSW. In NSW, the Party's history is dominated by Tenterfield's Michael Bruxner, who retired in 1962 after 42 years in the Legislative Assembly, handing the seat over to his son.

After a long angst about supping with the devil, the Party belatedly entered a formal Coalition with the urban bourgeois Party (then the Nationalists) in 1927. The Party enjoyed office in the periods October 1927 – November 1930, and over the sustained periods May 1932 – May 1941, May 1965 – May 1976 (Charles Cutler as leader), and March 1988 – April 1995 (Wal Murray and Ian Armstrong as leaders).

The author, a sometime Party official, has relied on electoral claims to gauge the Party's success in office. Given that Labor has been fairly cynical regarding the bush (with the notable exception of William McKell's and James McGirr's Premierships during 1941-47 and 1947-52), it is fair to infer that much of the resources committed to the bush have been a result of Country Party leverage as the third force in Australian politics. Improved transport was Bruxner's passion. Apart from the predictable dam quotient, improved education and hospital facilities have been a major achievement. The Stevens-Bruxner Coalition established the Rural Bank in 1933 (missed by the author). The Party can take credit for the establishment of regional teachers' colleges and the University of New England (albeit McKell established the teachers' colleges in Wagga Wagga and Bathurst). The Party even claims credit for initiating state aid for independent schools in the 1960s (even though the Catholic Church was to be the major beneficiary, and Catholics in the Country Party were as scarce as Communists). A National Party Minister oversaw the initial planning for the Sydney Olympic Games.

One resounding failure was the New States Movement, which was not coincident with the Party, but which substantially overlapped, especially in the north of the State.

An important dimension missing from Davey's book is a detached reflection on the nature of the beast. The NSW Country Party started life as the Progressives, enjoying immediate electoral success soon after World War I. They soon split bitterly over the issue of coalition with the

Nationalists, but here was a new movement still deserving of note. They had strong democratic principles (of FSA origin), insisting on branch autonomy and local pre-selection rights in particular.

The Progressives saw themselves as an alternative general political force that would hopefully overtake the then Party alignments. They ran candidates and won seats in urban areas. The change of name to Country Party (following federal rural members) reflected a reluctant emphasis on farmer/rural electorates, but the tension never died. Doug Anthony's move in 1972 to change the Party's name to National (against which NSW held out for a decade) reignited the tension. It flared again with the seemingly hegemonic Bjelke-Peterson regime in Queensland in the 1980s, with the NSW Party divided between envy, with a desire to copy his success, others rightly claiming that Queensland was a world apart from NSW, and others furious with Bjelke-Petersen's attack on the federal Party.

The Party has also embodied a perennial tension over economic, social and ideological principles. Bruxner (and to a lesser extent Cutler after him) was transfixed by the felt need to fight the socialist beast and its Labor Party incarnation. 'God, King/Queen and Country' has often prevailed over self-interest. There were objective reasons for conflict with wage labour and the Labor Party (objective reasons for conflict with their Coalition urban bourgeois Party were perceived differently), but ideology inhibited potential liaisons on matters of mutual interest.

Economics and ideology met a heady incoherence when the Party lurched into 'free enterprise rhetoric, most notably in its 1982 'We Believe' document – 'We believe in Free Enterprise, private ownership and minimum government interference in industry, commerce, production and distribution'. Perhaps this tenet signaled a return of the elite grazier influence. But the divergence between the rhetoric and the Country Party's traditional program is laughable. Thus, for example, the Party could detest the 'socialist' Whitlam Government and wish its speedy demise, yet at the same time cooperate happily with Whitlam's Growth Centre decentralisation program.

Davey's commission more or less compelled him to conclude this book on an upbeat note. And the numbers are surprising. The Nationals

currently have 12 seats (out of 93) in the NSW Legislative Assembly – remarkable, given their non-existence in the urban-biased Sydney media. NSW provides 6 of 12 National Party Members of the federal House of Representatives (out of 150 seats).

But the book can't avoid confronting a qualitative deterioration since the mid-1990s. There was the attack from One Nation, if ephemeral. But there is the longer-term attack from Independents, many of them ex-National Party members. The NSW Parliament currently has three Independents residing in traditional National Party strongholds (Tamworth, Northern Tablelands, Dubbo) and another Independent who resigned his Party membership (Port Macquarie). Something is wrong at the grass roots.

Something is also wrong with the Coalition. The NSW Nationals during the Greiner/Fahey years went along with the Liberal's economic rationalist agenda, albeit achieving some concessions. At the federal level, since Tim Fischer's leadership (from 1990), the Nationals have essentially provided the numbers for their Coalition senior partners to dismantle the Nationals' long-standing agenda. Financial deregulation has been a disaster for all but the top end in the bush. Regional policy is non-existent (save for the defence-related Alice Springs-Darwin railway line); the sale of Telstra was delayed but is now proceeding; and the Free Trade Agreement with the United States ignored key rural constituencies. Drought assistance is generous, but a short-term stopgap.

Perhaps all that many farmers will have to comfort them is 'God, Queen and Country'. Davey's history highlights how much energy has been expended to reach this rather patchy endpoint to the fortunes of rural New South Wales.

Ken Turner and Michael Hogan (eds)

The Worldly Art of Politics

The Federation Press, Sydney, 2006.

Reviewed by Frank Stilwell

The government of New South Wales has sponsored a series of books to mark the sesquicentenary of 'responsible government' in the state (150 years spanning 1856 to 2006). In addition to the volume reviewed above and the others reviewed in the last two issues of this journal, a number of other new books have recently been published. These include two volumes on the premiers of New South Wales edited by David Clune and Ken Turner, and *Decision and Deliberation*, a history of the Parliament of New South Wales, edited by David Clune and Gareth Griffith, both published by the Federation Press.

Perhaps rather more out of the ordinary for an institutional series such as this is *The Worldly Art of Politics*, edited by Ted Turner and Michael Hogan, both formerly Associate Professors of Government at the University of Sydney, who have been involved at various stages of the sesquicentenary publishing project. As former ALP parliamentarian Rodney Cavalier acknowledges in his foreword to the book, Turner and Hogan's approach here is quite different to the standard institutional histories because of its emphasis on celebrating diverse political contributors, including some of whose work was 'against the grain of party discipline or majority faction'. One might cavil at Cavalier's use of the phrase 'the sublime art of politics', but there is certainly abundant evidence of its pragmatic, worldly character.

Turner and Hogan's compilation includes chapters by various authors about an array of interesting, but not always particularly prominent, political figures. Their common feature is, in general, that they have combined personal interests, ambitions, ideals and down-to-earth concerns to produce effective political outcomes. The chapters include Cavalier's own study of former deputy premier Jack Ferguson ('representing workers'), Jim Hagan's study of George Muir Black ('Labor publicist'), Maurice Graham's depiction of Arthur Hill Griffith ('standard-bearer of public enterprise') and Paul Davies on Charles

Cutler who led the Country Party during much of the long period of coalition government under Premier Askin - and got a major university established in his own rural electorate. Significant women are represented by chapters on the former leader of the Australian Democrats in NSW, Elizabeth Kirkby, and the pioneering feminist, Millicent Preston Standley. Other contributions include a chapter on what was distinctive about Nick Greiner's attempt to redefine government as the management of 'NSW Inc', and Graham Freudenberg's reflections on the role of speechwriters such as himself. All in all, there are 20 separate chapters, along with the editors' introduction and conclusion.

This is an interesting collection, showing that politics is not always a simple matter of 'top-down' decision-making. There *is* usually plenty of that, but there is also scope for much more diverse personal contributions within a broadly democratic framework. Not all contributors have been admirable. As Turner and Hogan note, 'during 150 years in New South Wales we have had few politicians with claims to sainthood. A handful have spent time in jail, and perhaps they few more should have joined them. Most however, have been as worthy or as unworthy as the general population. And some...have made very important contributions from the backbenches and sidelines.' They conclude that: 'Criticism and vigilance are necessary. But give credit where it is due'. Some cartoons also leaven the presentation of this nicely produced book.

Jamie Gough

Work, Locality and the Rhythms of Capital

Routledge, London, 2004, 356 pp.

Reviewed by Frank Stilwell

The restructuring of industry always interacts with changes in the nature of work and the economic wellbeing of different localities. These interactions have important implications for class relations, intra-class divisions among workers, and the politics of challenging the domination of capital over labour. Jamie Gough's book explores these themes. In terms of disciplinary character, it is at the interface between industrial relations, political economy and economic geography. In terms of

analytical focus, it is concerned with the labour process, capital accumulation and locality. An excellent introductory chapter sets out these themes, emphasising how the workers' experiences and jobs depend on the rhythms of investment and its restless spatial forms.

The empirical study on which much of the book depends derives from a research project conducted in London by researchers at Middlesex Polytechnic in 1978-1982. This gives the work the character of economic history. It relates to a very significant historical period, however, when the ravages of Thatcherism created major dislocations in employment conditions in the British economy. The focus on London makes it the more interesting because in that metropolis – unlike the smaller industrial towns on which this sort of research work has more typically concentrated – were major engines of urban economic growth, such as financial services, in close geographical proximity to other industries in rapid decline.

Gough's approach is Marxist, emphasising the general characteristics of the capital-labour relationship as well as the elements of difference – between industries, between localities and between workers with varying degrees of skill and bargaining power.

Politically, the challenge he poses is to identify the possibilities for more class-solidaristic practices in circumstances where fragmentation otherwise prevails. As the author puts it (on p.275), 'The dialectics of struggle for common aims and struggle against inequality are by no means straightforward'. His concluding chapter asserts the crucial need for planning of the flows of investment within and between industries as the key socialist goal for producing more secure employment. That perspective, of course, is anathema to the neoliberals who currently dominate economic discourse and policy practices.

The problem arising from an analysis such as this is to develop a political response to economic restructuring that recognises the differences (between workers interests according to their trade, industry and location) while emphasising a commonality of interest as a class. Jamie Gough's book is recommended reading for all who want to engage with that analytical and political challenge.