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***From Carr to Keneally. Labor in office in NSW 1995–2011***

Edited by David Clune and Rodney Smith. Allen & Unwin, 2012, 432pp, RRP \$39.99 (Ebook available).

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Few Australian citizens would know, when Robert John ‘Bob’ Carr entered the federal parliament in 2012, it was some 25 years overdue. From the time Carr started his parliamentary career — entering the NSW Legislative Assembly in 1983 — he was coincidentally being groomed for the safe federal seat of Kingsford-Smith held by Labor’s Lionel Bowen. The 1988 election dealt a heavy blow to the NSW parliamentary Labor party and Carr was marked a ‘doomed man’ when he reluctantly took on the role of leader in opposition. Doom it was not to be, leading the ALP back to government in 1995 where Carr remained Premier for ten years. As Carr the person was called upon to restore the fortunes of Labor in 1988, then Carr himself took responsibility for the drop in popularity of his Government. He resigned as Premier and from parliamentary service in August 2005. Life after Carr, however, was turbulent. In the five and a half years until the 2011 election, NSW had three Premiers — Morris Iemma, Nathan Rees and Kristina Keneally. In a baffling gesture of goodwill, the NSW electorate turned a blind eye to publically-aired internal party friction over policy (amongst other problems) and returned the government in the 2007 election. By 2011 time was up and Labor lost in a crushing defeat with a woman Premier (Keneally) and deputy (Carmel Tebbutt) at the helm.

Analysis of the outcome has been, in large part, recriminatory — a ‘few bad eggs’, the factions, diminution of the rank-and-file, preferencing by the Greens. Although interesting, in actuality, if our system of Government is doing its job, parties should not — and cannot — expect to govern forever. Not even significant historical precedents such as women holding the top governmental posts can keep a party in power in our system of popularly elected parliamentary government.

‘From Carr to Keneally: Labor in office in NSW 1995–2011’ is a project of the Committee for the Sesquicentenary of Responsible Government in NSW. Proudly scholarly, it documents the different models, interactions and circumstances to influence this period of Labor government decision-making and to characterise how it functioned. In effect, it details how Labor governed within a system which put it there and kept it there for 16 years: the parties (Labor, Liberal and National) and the influence of independents (including now Federal independents Tony Windsor and Rob Oakeshott whose parliamentary careers started in the NSW Legislative Assembly); its public policy agenda, including a chapter devoted to transport, a weakness that was to prove fatal in spite of its overall policy strengths; and, the key institutions and institutional framework that frustrated or furthered the

government's success. A political profile this is not. Those seeking to understand why Labor displayed 'born to rule' arrogance or myopia once Carr resigned will not find it here. Despite a section on 'Interpretations and Conclusions' and a chapter on the Labor Party by the gifted and unambiguous Rodney Cavelier, motive is missing. Substance abounds, however, helping readers to find their own answers.

It is not my intention to discuss each chapter which makes up this excellent volume — though all are worthy of individual attention — but to highlight those which I feel will be of specific interest to the APR readership. Rightly or wrongly, I have chosen Rodney Smith's chapter on the make-up and operation of the Parliament during this period, Anne Twomey on federalism and the three chapters which comprise the 'Interpretations and Conclusions' section.

Rodney Smith describes a hybrid legislature in NSW during 1995–2011:

...a lower house that normally follows the assumptions of majoritarian democracy (a disproportional electoral system that produces one clear winner, executive dominance and a single alternative government) and an upper house that is closer to the consensus model (a strong second house based on a proportional representation electoral system, a multi-party system and a struggle for power between the executive and legislature).

The chapter comprehensively tracks party composition (major and minor), the voting power of the parties and independents over time and, the relationship between the two houses. Parliament's role in calling the executive to account during the period seems to have had limited success. Labor managed to resist most initiatives to open itself to more parliamentary scrutiny — despite the efforts of opposition and crossbench MLCs — and ministerial resignations were the product of enquiry by such bodies as the Independent Commission Against Corruption or by the media. Having said that, the resignation of one high-profile minister, Carl Scully, was not as a result of public disdain for his failings and arrogance but for twice misleading the house. Parliament may not have the final word but it still has a say.

Anne Twomey traces the level of interest and activity NSW paid to national politics and to state-federal financial relations from 1995–2011. Twomey's view is that the pragmatic approach of the NSW government during this time meant its impact on federalism foundations and reforms was minimal. Disappointing but accurate. Compared with those who came after him, Carr was somewhat activist at the national level, particularly on drugs policy reform. He also supported John Howard on matters of security — uniform gun laws and anti-terrorism initiatives — but, despite his desire to think big, his imprimatur was clear — to gain wins for his state.

As with all the contributions to this book, the final three chapters (by Rodney Smith, David Clune and Michael Hogan) are well argued and tightly written. Their job is to bring the book together to tell the story of this period in the history of government of Australia's oldest and most populous state. They do it well. Those also seeking to understand 'what went wrong' will not be disappointed.

My reading of it is that the problem for the 1995–2011 NSW Labor government was, first and foremost, they won one election too many (2007). Not only did they struggle to fill the personality void left by Carr’s departure but, like many multi-term governments, they lost policy focus. As Smith reminds us, this was certainly true with the failed attempt by Premier Maurice Iemma and his Treasurer Michael Costa to privatise the electricity system. Iemma and Costa failed to convince their party, and/or the public, they understood the first principle of public policy analysis — know the problem you are trying to fix. For Clune, 2007 may have seen a return to government but with a much diminished pool of talent from which to draw strength and ideas. Add to this an astute and likeable opposition leader, Barry O’Farrell, who moved beyond party constraints to capture the imagination of an electorate, most tellingly in seats long considered Labor strongholds. Hogan looks at the shifts in the system of electing political parties to government: the role of mass media in ‘dumbing down’ the party political and electoral processes; the loss of political neutrality within the public service (in NSW as a result of changes by the Coalition government from which Carr took control); increasingly blurred lines between federal and state responsibilities; and, the mixed blessing for political parties of public funding of election campaigns. For NSW Labor in particular it was also a diminishing membership base from which to generate policy and remain united in its implementation. There is no case made for Labor in these chapters. They provide an overview and perspective on lessons and legacies left by it to the state of New South Wales.

In keeping with the projects commissioned by the Committee for the Sesquicentenary of Responsible Government in NSW, there is much to value in this book. Chapters are not long but, as contributors are specialists in their field, they are fact-filled and concise. What is most valuable is the scholarly research and documentation of an era, and in an area, where history is often dominated by first person narration. ▲