

Decision and Deliberation: the Parliament of New South Wales, 1856-2003. David Clune and Gareth Griffith. The Federation Press: Sydney 2006. Pp.xv + 736

This is a huge book, and I have not read it all. Indeed, I cannot imagine many readers' cheerfully sitting down to read it from cover to cover. It is, nonetheless, engagingly written, quite candid, penetrating where I am competent to judge its analysis, and sometimes quite funny. All credit to its authors and especially to the Sesquicentenary Committee of Responsible Government in New South Wales, which funded it. No commercial publisher would have done so, yet dozens, perhaps hundreds of writers will now rely on it for what they set out to do in their turn. Books like this one are simply indispensable to a better understanding of our political life.

It is not a study of the rise and fall of governments in New South Wales, but of the institution in which those governments were formed and unmade. The authors co-authored the concluding bits to the chapters and the Conclusion itself, and while Clune concentrated on the Assembly in his writing Griffith focussed on the Council. They contrast two perspectives in their analysis, which they term the 'liberal' and the 'executive': are parliaments there to allow someone to govern, or are they there so that ideas and policies can be debated? Of course parliaments are there to do both, but to what degree in each house? That they find the lower house to be the executive arena is not surprising, and they do not suggest that it should be surprising. Yet a great deal of important debate does go on in lower houses everywhere, and it is in part our own expectations about the significance of the rise and fall of governments that make us sometimes overlook that point. Has parliament as a debating place declined? They think its role here waxes and wanes, and one of the virtues of a 150-year span of analysis is that you can approach questions like that one in a measured way.

The Legislative Council is perhaps the more interesting chamber, partly because it has been reformed in a major way on three separate occasions. In each of its manifestations it was a trial to the party in power. Its members were first appointed for five years, then for life, then for twelve years through an electoral college of both houses, then for twelve years (now eight) through direct election on a PR basis. Labor tried to abolish it, but the members appointed to do so had second thoughts once appointed for life. I was given a guided tour of the whole place by the father of the Assembly, Sir Michael Bruxner, in 1959, and he showed me a little aperture in the wall through which you could discern the corrugated iron of the original Council building. As I recall, the building was a pre-fab manufactured in England, which languished in India for some time before being sent on to New South Wales. He also showed me the lovely reading room in the Library, which has sadly and probably inevitably gone in order to integrate and enlarge the cluster of buildings that made up the parliament. I would have appreciated rather more on the fabric of the Parliament, and not only because of its heritage significance.

Over a few years I read more than twenty years of the Assembly Hansard and some of the Council's equivalent as well, and came to know Members through their speeches, and the occasional photographs published in the press. It was a

pleasure to see some of those faces again in this book: Sir Daniel Levy, a long-serving and exemplary Speaker through several governments, Bruxner and his Premier Bertie Stevens, Jack Lang, W. J. McKell, Sir Henry Manning, as well as more recent politicians whom I came to know personally. My own view was that both houses have been good places for debate.

Those who are astonished at recent physical assaults in the chamber will find other examples (see under 'disorderly conduct'), as will those seeking bizarre events, like the election of Speaker Willis in 1911 and its aftermath. The NSW Parliament has been a robust institution, in several senses of that adjective. But it has also been a place in which personal respect and friendship have frequently crossed party lines, notwithstanding what is said in the chamber. And it has been a place, too, for not a little wit. My own favourite comes from a debate, now noted only in my memory, on the insidious efforts of the margarine industry to replace butter in the affections of the consumer. A Country Party MLA suggested that margarine should be coloured so that it did not resemble butter in appearance. One wag from across the floor called out: 'Perhaps the Honourable Member would like it coloured green!' The response was instantaneous: 'Mr Speaker, the Hon. Member is raising the sectarian issue!'

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