
BOOK REVIEW

NATHAN, HE REALLY DOESN'T LIKE YOU

REVIEW OF THE FOG ON THE HILL BY FRANK SARTOR



The Fog on the Hill: How NSW Labor Lost Its Way by Frank Sartor (Melbourne University Press, 2011) ISBN: 9780522861068; pages: 224.

Following upon Simon Benson's *Betrayal: The Underbelly of Australian Labor* (Pantera Press, 2010) and Rodney Cavalier's *Power Crisis: The Self Destruction of a State Labor Party* (Cambridge University Press, 2010) (reviewed in *Workplace Review* at (2011) 2 WR 37), former Sydney Lord Mayor and senior New South Wales Cabinet Minister, Frank Sartor, has written a *cri de coeur* about the travails of the recently departed New South Wales Labor government. The difference between this treatment and its predecessors is that Sartor for eight years had been at the core of the government.

Sartor's background is unlike most Labor politicians. He was raised near Griffith by a large farming family from Italy. He studied at Sydney University, lived within the halls of St John's College and graduated in chemical engineering. His interest in politics was brought about by his objection to the scale and standard of residential development in his suburb, Newtown. He became an independent councillor in 1984 on the City of Sydney Council and was Lord Mayor from 1991 to 2003. He did not join the Labor Party until late in life and only after he had been assured of endorsement as a Labor Party candidate for the seat of Rockdale. His late call to the Labor Party was probably why he was never fully accepted (or trusted) within the tight-knit Labor tribe.

In this book, he provides his gratitude to the Labor Party for the opportunities it gave him. He also says that during the 16 years of Labor administration in New South Wales there were successes. However, this book acerbically and forensically identifies the political disasters and follies which brought about the worst defeat the Labor Party has suffered in New South Wales in 100 years. Paradoxically, he criticises the very system which catapulted him into public office. The fact was he joined the Labor Party on 1 November 2002, was pre-selected eight days later by use of the notorious N40 rule, was elected on 22 March 2003 and was sworn in as a minister on 2 April 2003. No wonder that branch members feel disenfranchised. Perhaps this is one of the reasons for the worrying decline in the membership of the party.

He claims one of the main causes for the collapse in support for the State Labor government was the disproportionate influence of trade unions upon the direction of the government. He says this is despite the fact that the proportion of the workforce who are members of a union has reduced from approximately 55% in the 1970s to about 18%. Despite these figures, the unions retain over 50% control of the party. As a consequence, major reforms affecting the public sector unions were stymied. Examples of such union-led obstruction to the public interest were the proposed sale of the State's electricity assets; Premier Nathan Rees' intervention, contrary to departmental advice, to adjourn a claim of offsets needed by public sector unions in Industrial Relations Commission enterprise agreement negotiations; and Premier Kristina Keneally's renegeing upon the nationally harmonised workplace safety laws deal. He noted also that during the period of the Labor government, the New South Wales public sector wage increases far exceeded the rest of industry.

He gives some nice vignettes of some of his colleagues.

- The dishevelled John Della Bosca, he describes as being "a well-read homespun poor man's intellectual".
- Eric Roozendaal, he describes as "the worst treasurer New South Wales has had in decades".

Like many other commentators, Sartor laments the influence of Eddie Obeid and Joe Tripodi, the leaders of the so-called Terrigal sub-faction of the Centre Unity group, as being responsible for most of the difficulties which had occurred in the latter stages of the government.

The ascension of Rees to the premiership was brought about because the Labor Party General Secretary, Karl Bitar, had said that Cabinet was on the nose as there were “too many wogs” and what was needed was “an Aussie Westie”. Sartor observed that it was a very strange way to select a leader. However, it is for Rees that Sartor reserves his vitriol. No epithet is lost on the Member for Toongabbie variously described as abrasive, bombastic, impulsive, reckless, impetuous, lacking in judgment and rash, all of which was surrounded by baseless cockiness. The short-lived Rees premiership “started as a soap opera and then went to fully fledged farce”.

Once it became obvious that Rees was incapable of saving the Labor party, the next choice of the factional war lords was Keneally. At the Centre Unity meeting, Sartor lost the nomination for Premier by two votes. Of Keneally he says that she had no considered policy agenda, no narrative and was surreally self-assured. However, her period of being Premier was marred by the following:

While Keneally was charming ministers they were being chronically insulted and undermined by Roozendaal.

Apart from giving these graphic insights regarding the personalities and failings of the former State Labor government, the value of this book is the opinions Sartor gives regarding specific matters of public administration. It is a book well worth reading, not only by members of the failed government, but also those of the incoming government. Sartor gives a detailed account of the reasons why important economic reforms, such as the sale of electricity assets, carbon pricing, the solar bonus scheme, Sydney’s transport infrastructure and most particularly, his specialty, planning laws need dispassionate, intelligent consideration. The book clearly shows that if anybody by dint of their own personality and experience could have held the Labor Party debacle at bay, it would have been Sartor, rather than Rees or Keneally. Sartor versus O’Farrell would have been a far more compelling and closer struggle.

Sartor also provides valuable suggestion as to how the Labor party could be reformed. The Labor party is perceived to have lost its way and to be motivated and governed by vested interests. Hence, the book title’s play on words on Ben Chifley’s “Light on the Hill” speech. It is clear that the problems for the Labor Party are that it lacks vision and it is now governed by the Ruddesque 24-hour news cycle. A case in point being the recent unseemly jockeying by Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard to grab the limelight over the Australian 14-year-old boy caught with a small bag of marijuana in Bali. The news cycle is hardly going to set a path for the future.

One important reform that requires a debate, which may be unpleasant, is how could it be that the Labor Party of the 21st century still has as part of its key platforms, the objective of the “democratic socialisation of industry, production, distribution and exchange, to the extent necessary to eliminate exploitation and other anti-social features in these fields”? How could this possibly be in the party platform when one compares it to the reality of the modern Labor Party? The emperor has no clothes and should be told. The objection to socialism goes beyond Oscar Wilde’s fear that it would take up far too many evenings but that no-one really believes in it anymore. Sartor suggests that the way of reform is to empower the membership and to rid it of the sectional interests, particularly the unions which continue to dominate it.

This is an excellent book which needs a wide audience. One criticism is perhaps that the book is longer than it needed to be, with Chapter 15 seeming to be a repetition of earlier material. It’s a pity Sartor hadn’t written a similar book about local government when he stepped down as Lord Mayor of Sydney.

Jeffrey Phillips SC