

AUSTRALIAN BOOKS

Sorry state

Caroline Overington

BETRAYAL: THE UNDERBELLY OF AUSTRALIAN LABOR

by Simon Benson

Pantera Press, \$49.99

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Simon Benson's new book is called *Betrayal: the Underbelly of Australian Labor*.

It's a hardcover book, which is rare in Australia. The great Bill Leak drew the cartoons, and it's got a raised-print title, meaning it's a lovely book to hold.

To read? It's appalling.

That's no reflection on Benson. He wrote the book when he was a political reporter for Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* in the NSW parliament. As such, he was a man whose days were largely spent with the kind of people you wouldn't have in the house, let alone the House.

Surely there has never in the history of democracy been such a wretched clutch of politicians? The people in this book — they include a prime minister, two premiers, union officials, sundry ministers of the Crown — are vain. They are disloyal. They are spiteful and hateful and immoral.

They have what they call friends, whom they ditch when a better connection comes along. They knife each other, but not with dignity, and for no good purpose, other than their own gain. It's page after page of skulduggery and deception, chicanery and machination, and not a noble player among them.

Benson starts by saying: 'To some, this book will be about the execution of a state premier [that would be Morris Iemma, who is now two premiers ago, which shows how dysfunctional things are in NSW] and the betrayal of a friend [that would be Iemma again, betrayed by Kevin Rudd, who was still a leader in opposition when the events described in his book took place, not all that long ago].'

The more important story, though, 'is how the Labor party turned on itself, abandoned a leader and in doing so lost all sense of its purpose ... to govern for the good of its citizens'.

Yes. Oh yes. That's precisely the point of the book, to show you, the reader, exactly what's going on in Macquarie Street (the NSW par-

liament) and Sussex Street (Labor party headquarters, where real power resides).

You are going to hate what you learn.

Part of the drama centres on Rudd, who is trying to win the 2007 federal election. He's worried about NSW, and with good reason: the state is a basket case. The 10-hour traffic jam is still ahead of the weary citizens, but sex has been traded for development applications, a woman has given birth to a stillborn infant in a public hospital toilet, and a child has turned up dead in a duck pond, despite being known to welfare agencies.

Premier Iemma wants to sell off the electricity to raise cash to fix the joint, but that's going to mean an ugly fight with the unions. Rudd comes down to Sydney and tells Iemma not to do it before the federal poll.

'If you help me, I'll get elected,' Rudd says. 'Work with me and, when the time comes, we can fuck them together.'

Iemma thinks that's fine, which says much about both of them.

Rudd then leaves NSW and basically refuses to come back. Benson says this is because 'the federal Labor message had to be re-crafted to put as much distance as possible between Rudd and NSW ... Rudd decided he could not afford to be seen during the campaign in the company of any member of the NSW government, including the premier'.

Imagine that. The stink is so high you can't even be in the room with them. And yet, they are you.

The federal poll is held, and Rudd wins.

For an incredibly long time, Iemma continues to believe that Rudd is going to stick by his promise to help him sell off the electricity, and fix NSW. Rudd in fact comes to Iemma's office, picks through a plate of melon, and

explains that the conservative Coalition that's just been booted from office has left huge bags of money behind, and the issue is how to spend it.

He's on the lookout for big, impressive infrastructure projects. Iemma tells him he's got a Paris-style Metro for Sydney in mind, to ease the shocking congestion, and he could use some federal cash to go with the money he'll get from the power sale, and Rudd nods, and says nothing.

What Rudd actually did with the pots of Coalition savings was spray it about: \$900 to every taxpayer to spend as they pleased. The NSW treasurer, Michael Costa, to use one example, used his wife's \$900 stimulus cheque to buy a statue of a small boy pissing water into his swimming pool, under a sign that says: 'Rudd stimulates, fiscally.'

He tells Benson: 'That's how economically ridiculous I thought it was. It's the equivalent of pissing taxpayer's money against the wall.'

Around this time, Rudd stops taking Iemma's calls, except to tell him that the deal to 'fuck them' is off.

'It's a state issue,' Rudd says. 'I can't really get involved.'

It's all very bleak and grubby, but the true value of the book is the exploration of how power in NSW is a function of deals done in the backrooms, of men and women of limited talent and less honour swapping seats between each other, and giving others away to friends; putting other mates on boards, at the taxpayer's expense, rooting each other for a while, and then rooting somebody else. There is a great deal in the book about personal relationships between the main players — where they all met, and when and where they'd drink together, and who went out with who, and so forth — and it's therefore clear that Benson has had to spend a great deal of time with the people who currently are in power in Australia's most populous state, which makes you think: you poor bastard.

There seems no debate in NSW that the first state, with its jewel of a harbour, its iconic opera house and bridge, is in the final stages of Empire. Every public institution — the hospitals, the schools, the roads, the trains — has collapsed, and development is corrupt or strangled, and there's a grim acceptance on behalf of the voting public that they are going to have to wear this mob until early 2011, when they can, finally, satisfyingly, boot them from office.

Then again, at lunch the other day, a girlfriend said: 'Surely [the Liberal party's] Barry O'Farrell cannot lose this election?' and we all shuddered, and knocked on the wooden table top because, you know, in NSW, never say never.

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