



Rekindling the light on the hill

POLITICS

THE FOG ON THE HILL: How NSW Labor Lost Its Way.
 By Frank Sartor. Melbourne University Press. 373pp. \$34.99.

LOOKING FOR THE LIGHT ON THE HILL: Modern Labor's Challenges. By Troy Bramston. Scribe. 279pp. \$21.99.

Reviewer: JOHN UHR

Poor Ben Chifley. His 1949 phrase "the light on the hill" referred to Labor's "great objective" of using the power of government to promote social security at home and international security abroad. The defeat of Chifley's government later that same year ushered in Menzies' long reign. Labor supporters kept the faith during those difficult years of disorganisation and electoral disaster by embracing Chifley's image of "the light on the hill" as a pithy profession of their creed. The creed has recently returned to a central place in Labor lamentations, perhaps explained by the painful contemporary echoes of the 1949 passing of power to their conservative opponents. Could monarchist Tony Abbott be the new Sir Robert?

These two books deserve one another. Both derive from the turbulent world of Chifley's NSW Labor. Sartor's *The Fog on the Hill* is a sardonic firsthand account of how Labor lost office at the last state election. The loss wasn't an accident. The electoral detonation can be traced back to the handiwork of leaders who, says Sartor, "in Chifley parlance" were operators rather than true believers. Bramston's *Looking for the Light on the Hill* is an incisively unorthodox account of how Labor can learn from the NSW model of factionalised misgovernment. The required overhaul is more than cosmetic. Bramston knows that political ugliness is more than skin deep. Both books are by Labor insiders. Sartor representing the retiring old guard and Bramston the aspiring regenerators.

Both authors gesture towards Chifley not only in their titles but in their theme that Labor needs a return to the Chifley standard of trusted honesty and plain-speaking decency in its leaders. Chifley stayed on as opposition leader after the defeat of his government. He knew that there was a job to do. The last Labor leader to accept the opposition job after defeat was Gough Whitlam, who shared much of Chifley's commitment to the traditional Labor creed. Both authors agree that they don't make them quite like that any more.

For readers searching for the lowdown on why Labor has generally lost its way, Sartor's book of scary case studies provides plenty of evidence of how Labor leaders can take themselves far too seriously as political operators, deluded about how much they know about policy and about how little they need to listen to the communities they represent. But Bramston's book of fresh thinking reverses the coin, allowing readers to see how a new generation of Labor strategists is reshaping party thinking to reconnect with disenfranchised voters. The sour has to come before the sweet.

Sartor's revelations about the madhouse on Macquarie

Street will be dismissed by some Labor insiders as sour grapes. Sartor's confession of misguided government paves the way for Bramston's profession of a new creed, which probably comes too late for the Gillard Government, should its leaders ever be convinced of the need for anything so coy as a creed.

The real value of Sartor's book is the author's long experience as a Labor heavyweight, first as Sydney mayor, then as a state minister before retiring at the last election. His theme is that those who care only for politics do not care enough. A party with no vision for the long term will eventually be found out by voters who tire of "the scripted lines, of the robots, of the repetition, and of the spin". Sartor quotes from Chifley's famous speech when illustrating the difference between the real gems of historic Labor and the fool's gold of contemporary careerists.

Bramston now writes for *The Australian* as a voice of the respectable left. Rupert will be surprised that he is employing a self-described "unreconstructed Keatingite", a phrase used here to remind readers of the last incarnation of Chifley. Bramston's book is directed at disaffected Labor supporters. He was one of the first staffers to walk away from the Rudd government, himself disappointed. He walked back in when Gillard took over, only to retreat a second time as the promise faded. His book is engagingly personal, sketching out a vision for the sort of Labor party (now "hollow at its core", a party whose "best days are behind it") that could get him back inside.

I think this is the best of the current crop of books charting new Labor. The core problem for Labor is one of mission rather than management. Bramston's three cure-alls are a new leadership philosophy, values-based policies and a democratic membership base. He gives an upbeat account of Chifley's famous speech, with its "very ideal of Labor". He uses Chifley as the exemplar of his three solutions: a source of decent leadership, an advocate of convincing beliefs, and an inspiration for a supportive movement of party activists. The book draws on extensive interviews with Labor heavyweights, not all of whom are Gillard loyalists, but all neatly marshalled by Bramston to provide the evidence that Labor's regeneration rests in the hands of those who can still distinguish ends from means.

Both authors have important things to say. Sartor is truthful but depressing. Bramston is uplifting in a wishful-thinking kind of way. Both authors will make an impact, but I think only Bramston will make a difference.

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