

Australian State Politics and Policy in Transition: The Case of NSW

Rodney Smith

'Australian State Politics and Policy in Transition: The Case of NSW' was held in the Boardroom of the Darlington Centre, the University of Sydney, on 7-8 July, 2011. The Workshop was sponsored by the Academy of Social Sciences Australia and the Department of Government and International Relations, University of Sydney.

The rationale for the Workshop was to produce systematic analysis of stability and change in Australian politics and public policy at the state level. Labor's recently completed 16 years in office in NSW provided an excellent case study for such analysis. The five objectives of the Workshop were:

1. to assess the extent to which the politics and public policy of Australia's largest state have changed over the past two decades;
2. to identify the causes of change and stability in NSW state politics and public policy;
3. to apply some of the newly dominant concepts in political science and policy analysis, in order to assess critically their explanatory strength in the Australian state context;
4. to undertake an unusually comprehensive overview of the patterns of politics and public policy-making in one Australian jurisdiction.
5. to provide presenters with high level feedback on papers that will later be included in a major publication.

The Workshop was organised by two political scientists (Rodney Smith and Murray Goot) but had a multi-disciplinary focus, spanning political science, public administration, economics, history, law, sociology, education, environmental science, health policy, transport and logistics. Workshop presenters and participants were chosen as experts in their fields who were at various stages in their careers, from Early Career Researchers to Emeritus Professors.

The participants and their institutional or disciplinary affiliations are listed below:

Rodney Cavalier, historian.

Peter Chen, Government and International Relations, University of Sydney.

Michael Di Francesco, Australian and New Zealand School of Government, University of Melbourne.

Sandra Egger, Faculty of Law, University of New South Wales.

Paul Fawcett, Government and International Relations, University of Sydney.

David Gadiel, consulting economist.
Murray Goot, Politics and International Relations, Macquarie University.
Antony Green, election analyst, Australian Broadcasting Corporation.
Michael Hogan, Government and International Relations, University of Sydney.
John Hughes, Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Sydney
Claudine Moutou, Institute of Transport and Logistics Studies, University of Sydney.
Corinne Mulley, Institute of Transport and Logistics Studies, University of Sydney.
John Nethercote, Public Policy Institute, Australian Catholic University.
Russell Ross, School of Economics, University of Sydney.
Jeremy Sammut, Centre for Independent Studies.
Geoffrey Sherington, Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Sydney
Rodney Smith, Government and International Relations, University of Sydney.
Bruce Thom, School of Geosciences, University of Sydney.
Anne Twomey, Law School, University of Sydney.
Ariadne Vromen, Government and International Relations, University of Sydney.
Liam Weeks, Department of Government, University College Cork.

Most of the papers discussed at the Workshop were circulated beforehand. These included several papers from invited participants who were unable to attend: Bradley Bowden on rural politics in NSW (Griffith University), David Clune on the 2011 election campaign (University of Sydney), Robert Freestone and Peter Williams on urban planning (both University of New South Wales). The program was divided into eight sessions over two days, covering the following topics:

Session 1 Stability and Change in Government Institutions (1)

Parliament (Rodney Smith)
The Impact of Federalism (Anne Twomey)

Session 2 Stability and Change in Government Institutions (2)

Premiers and Cabinets (Paul Fawcett)
The Public Sector (Michael Di Francesco)

Session 3 Key Public Policies (1)

Budgets and Finance (Russell Ross)
Education (Geoffrey Sherington and John Hughes)

Session 4 Key Public Policies (2)

Health (Jeremy Sammut and David Gadiel)
Law and Order (Sandra Egger)

Session 5 Key Public Policies (3)

The Environment (Bruce Thom)

Transport (Corinne Mulley and Claudine Moutou)

Session 6 The Political Parties and Independents 1995-2011.

The Labor Party (Rodney Cavalier)

The Liberal Party (Rodney Smith)

Minor Party and Urban Independent Challengers (Rodney Smith)

Session 7 The 2011 NSW Election.

The Polls (Murray Goot)

The News Media (Peter Chen)

The Results (Antony Green)

Session 8 Interpretations and Conclusions.

1995 to 2011 in the Longer-Term Perspective (Michael Hogan)

In the first two sessions, participants discussed changes to major institutions of government. The first paper, presented by Rodney Smith, focused on the role of Parliament. Labor's dominance in the Legislative Assembly between 1995 and 2011 contrasted with its lack of control in the Legislative Council, leading to different patterns of legislative behaviour and culture becoming consolidated in the two houses. Anne Twomey argued that the Labor Government played a supporting rather than leading role in the development of Australian cooperative federalism. In two papers that dovetailed well, Paul Fawcett and Michael Di Francesco explored the operations of the core executive and the wider public service in NSW. Both argued against simplistic accounts of governance failure during the later period of Labor government, pointing instead to more complex understandings of the dynamic power relationships between premiers, ministers, ministerial advisers, public service heads and watchdog agencies.

The next three sessions considered NSW Labor's record in key policy areas. They provided mixed results. Russell Ross, for example, argued that the Labor governments had generally performed well in economic policy, while Jeremy Sammut and David Gadiel pointed to consistent failures to reform a poorly performing health system in the face of powerful professional and union interests, the parochial demands of voters, ministerial flux and organisational uncertainty. The other policy papers described positions somewhere between these extremes. Bruce Thom, for example, argued that despite the difficulties of its final years, the Labor Government continued to achieve some environmental initiatives. One of the most valuable aspects of the discussion in these sessions was the way in which it allowed policy experts to see whether the institutional patterns described in the first two sessions could be used to explain the trajectories of success and failure in particular policy areas.

Papers in Session 6 analysed party politics. Rodney Cavalier outlined the structural problems that have developed within NSW

Labor over the past decade. Rodney Smith argued that the poor performance of the NSW Liberal Party after 1995 lay in its failure to find lasting solutions to problems identified by commentators almost fifty years ago. The final paper in this session explored the rise of the NSW Greens and the different ways in which the Christian Democrats and the Shooters Party had consolidated their positions.

The presentations of Murray Goot on the opinion polls and Peter Chen on the news media in Session 7 both emphasised the ways in which NSW politics in the lead up to the election was treated as a horse race, even when the outcome was certain. Opinion pollsters and the media both missed opportunities to focus more broadly on policy issues and support for alternative public policy options. Antony Green's analysis of the election results demonstrated both the extent of Labor's 2011 loss and its foreshadowing by Labor's low first preference vote in both the 2003 and 2007 elections.

The final session, based on a paper by Michael Hogan, saw lively discussion of the future of NSW politics and public policy. Participants disagreed on the extent to which the current NSW position was indicative of broader Australian and even international trends or was the product of a unique set of circumstances. They also differed on whether the quality of NSW politics and public policy had declined, when any such decline began and the nature of its causes.

Papers from the Workshop have since been revised to form the chapters of the forthcoming book *From Carr to Keneally: NSW Labor in Office 1995-2011*, which is edited by David Clune and Rodney Smith and will be published by Allen and Unwin in March 2012. Many participants in the Workshop acknowledged the helpfulness of the two days of discussion in revising their draft chapters for the book. The cross-disciplinary nature of the sessions was particularly valuable. Apart from the forthcoming book, several participants discussed possible future collaborations and projects in areas of politics, governance and public policy.