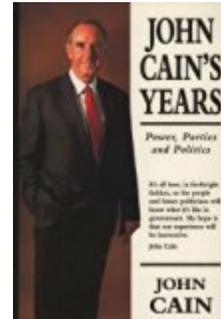


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John Cain. *John Cain's Years Power, Parties and Politics: Power, Parties and Politics*. Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1995. xvi + 323 pp. + 12 pp. of plates. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-522-84615-7; \$16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-522-84707-9.

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Published on H-ANZAU (March, 1997)



John Cain was once described as the sort of individual whose idea of an exciting night out was to stay at home and rearrange his sock drawer. His three hundred page memoir which recounts the better part of nine years at the head of Victoria's only successful ALP government suggests otherwise. Rather, it reflects an image of a painfully conscientious, staunchly principled person who erred on the side of generosity to his opponents.

Such, no doubt, is the image many former politicians would like to foster about themselves. Fortunately for Cain it also sits well with a dispassionate assessment of his behaviour when Premier, and more particularly, the peculiar circumstances of his demise. Fortunately for the reader, his straightforward prose is free of the hysterical, vindictive, self-justificatory ranting which characterise the recollections of another ex-head of government in Australia.

This is in no real sense an autobiography. It recounts only those personal details which directly impacted on his political philosophy, most notably the sectarian split in Labor ranks during the fifties which destroyed his father's government. Indeed, the influence of Cain senior is discernible throughout. In a revealing passage, the author declares:

The lifelong credo that emerged (from his father) was that for society to function smoothly government had to provide stability, decency and integrity, and it had to act to protect those values. (p. xv) In other words, there is everything to be said about good old-fashioned Keynesian pump-priming, a theme pursued with dogged determination particularly in the later chapters.

In keeping with his deliberate writing style, Cain es-

chews the chronological, narrative approach in favour of one which examines each significant issue or event from alpha to omega, drawing extensively on the official documentation of the era. It is curious that he devotes little attention to the parliamentary situation which existed throughout his term of government, making only occasional reference to the difficulties engendered by the absence of an Upper House majority. This is particularly odd given the historical recurrence of protracted disputes between the chambers in Victoria; the fact that his father's second administration (1945-47) was destroyed by the Legislative Council's rejection of supply; and that his own government laboured continually under threats to have the same done to them. The Upper House problem is also one of the very few where Cain is guilty of selective memory. He claims the opposition majority rejected plans to remove the Council's power to reject appropriation bills and introduce proportional representation for elections. In fact the proposal failed because of Cain's refusal to accept a narrow definition of supply confined to bills appropriating money for the ordinary annual services of government, rather than the broader one encompassing all budgetary measures.

John Cain's Years is very much the view from the Premier's Office and Cabinet Room. The author dwells for the greater part on issues concerning the executive: its relationship with the party organisation, trade unions and the Hawke-Keating governments in Canberra. To this extent it offers far more to students of public policy and inter-governmental relations than those with an interest in parliamentary and electoral politics. Although an unprecedented achievement, three consecutive electoral victories pass almost without comment. The official Liberal opposition is very much a side issue. For John

Cain, the real opposition resides within the Labor Party itself. There are two dimensions to this. First, Cain's unaligned status. To this he attributes his considerable success, for the first six and a half years at least, in managing the competing interests (hatreds?) of the hide-bound and clannish Socialist Left and Labor Unity factions. Cain proffers the belief that a leader hostage to the demands of either would be by definition compromised in his dealings with the other. The flip side of this coin is that when things cease rolling along in a mutually satisfactory manner as occurred with the protracted and highly embarrassing tramways dispute, the leader is invariably anointed sacrificial goat. The leadership then becomes a prize for whichever faction emerges as dominant from the subsequent blood-letting. After reading Cain's account, it is hard to fault his logic.

The second dimension focuses on his experiences at eight Premiers Conferences, seven of which took place when Paul Keating was Treasurer. In essence, Cain believes that Hawke's and Keating's embrace of economic rationalism, pushed so hard and so consistently by the federal treasury throughout the eighties, was not only a betrayal of Labor principles but a repudiation of common sense. It is interesting that, notwithstanding his own status as a self-avowed and highly unfashionable Keynesian, Cain is still able to offer a kind word for Bob Hawke. He is pointed in his refusal to do so for Keating. He blames Keating largely for the high interest rate strategy and concomitant cuts to federal grants to the states which undermined the economic successes of his government. Time and again there is reference to the much vaunted federal budget surpluses of the eighties being funded by 'screwing the states'.

It would be relatively easy, at first glance, to accuse Cain of suffering from a persecution complex. He blames in turn the militant unions, the factions, the federal government and the media for the undermining, and ultimate destruction of his premiership. But unlike many memorialists before him, Cain sets out in logical, considered fashion to prove his case. He appears largely to do so. Most telling is his account of the Woodward Royal Commission set up after his resignation to investigate the Tricontinental and State Bank failures. It says much for the power over information dissemination possessed by contemporary executive government in Westminster systems that his total exoneration by the Commission of any wrong-doing or incompetence in these matters remains largely unknown to the public. That a Labor government under Cain's successor Joan Kirner refused to allow one minute of parliamentary debate on Woodward's findings is evidence of the blackest political treachery imaginable. Cain was still a government back-bencher at the time. His reputation and integrity had suffered enormously from the hysteria which surrounded these events. He was also, incidentally, the most successful Labor leader in Victorian history. By contrast, in Western Australia the ALP suffered considerable and well publicised anguish over the fate of Brian Burke after he had been convicted and imprisoned by a court of law. Solidarity forever? Selectively, it seems.

John Cain's Years should give any aspiring politician, particularly those conceited enough to covet ministerial office, cause to think a little, even if, as is likely, cogitation does not trespass regularly on their daily routine. It is a grim and largely humourless account of the thankless nature of reformist government, and the even more thankless task of leading one.

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Citation: Justin Harding. Review of Cain, John, *John Cain's Years Power, Parties and Politics: Power, Parties and Politics*. H-ANZAU, H-Net Reviews. March, 1997.

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