

STUDIES IN CONTRASTS

Roger Scott

- Anna Bligh, *Through the Wall*, Harper Collins Australia, 2015.
- Michael O'Neill, *Michael, we really have to talk...plus 'a Subversive's Toolkit'*, Bent Banana Books, 2015.

Anna Bligh and Campbell Newman

Anna Bligh's autobiography is entitled *Through the Wall* with a subtitle on the cover: 'reflections on leadership, love and survival'. There are remarkable contrasts with the authorised biography of Campbell Newman reviewed previously.¹ For a start, there are the superficial differences in the physical feel of a book from a mainstream commercial publisher, including the quality and quantity of photographs. But even Harper Collins couldn't find funds for an index, indicating a focus on the same populist market as Newman rather than accommodating later students of history.

The big difference between the two books is that Bligh promises in the Preface that she has no interest in writing a 'backstabbing, tell-all critique of my colleagues in public life', and again this lessens the appeal of the book for current as well as later Queensland historians. Pollyanna may play well with her target audience, especially intelligent feminists also aspiring to join her going 'through the wall'. But there are big gaps left in the narrative where she has not drawn on inside knowledge to identify particular individuals with policy choices she unwisely embraced. This is in striking contrast to the Newman/King book.

The crowning example is the brevity with which she dismisses the election campaign of 2012 when she lost office. From her very earliest days in shadow cabinet, she had been included in the central strategy group organising campaigns, starting with the error of withdrawing endorsement for the sitting member for Mundingburra. She recounts the thrill of this close engagement and pays homage to the continuing role of people like Mike Kaiser, Terry Mackenroth and successive party secretaries and campaign directors. But by the time of the 2012 election, internal polling had prepared her for the misery of defeat. (She did not share the enthusiasm generated by her improved polling chances after the January 2011 floods which had caused the panic reaction to insert Newman as the LNP leader from outside parliament)

Newman spends more time in his book discussing the campaign than he does on his first year in office and he rails in particular against the viciousness of personal, ultimately unsubstantiated, accusations against him and against his family. He records the mental anguish created by this. Outside observers agreed with Newman in deploring this tactic. In the biography, Newman in turn identifies the villains, particularly the gullible media but also Jackie Trad and other unnamed campaign staff. Bligh gives only one sentence dealing with this issue when speculating about 'the many reasons for the malevolent nature of the result': 'They (the voters) didn't like the negativity of our campaign and marked us down heavily for it'. (p.282) Her focus instead is on the detriments of

¹ http://www.tjryanfoundation.org.au/dbase_upl/Scott_review_Newman_book.pdf

incumbency, the health payroll debacle and its associated scandals plus the federal Rudd-Gillard imbroglio.

She is also dismissive of the privatisation/asset sales as an electoral issue: 'Inside Labor, the noise about asset sales had quietened to a low hum, but the bruises were still healing and the troops disheartened'. She departs from her self-imposed ban on criticising opponents to lash out at unspecified but easily identifiable members of the trade union movement for being unreasonable in accusing her of lying to the electorate in the previous campaign. The explanations she offered for her subsequent defeat minimising the effect of the union members sitting on their hands might appear as wishful thinking.

But generally this is a sunny book. It gallops along and many readers will enjoy re-living the events she recounts from her ring-side seat. It tells a heart-warming story of progress of Bligh through life as a leader, winning against the odds a very prestigious and satisfying prize from humble beginnings. It pulls no punches about the particular challenges relating to gender issues, including a headstrong adolescence, unwanted pregnancies and ethical dilemmas posed for ardent feminists. It has moments of high drama - dealing with natural disasters - and riotous humour, such as when her mother had the elastic fail on her underwear when processing from her daughter's investiture at Government House.

Bligh writes with verve and insight. Unlike Newman, who offers many additions to the historical record and excursions into general analysis, Bligh keeps a simple narrative line, giving plenty of space to the times she enjoyed and glossing over any awkwardness. Atypically, there is one quiet backhander directed at her most outspoken critic within the party. In explaining her choice of deputy-leader from among the right-wing faction needed to balance the ticket across presumed ideological divisions, she preferred Paul Lucas to John Mickel because Paul was 'hungrier, would work harder and was hard-wired for loyalty'. (p.149)

There is a constant domesticity in the love theme concerning the role her husband Greg Withers played in his prominent supporting role. There are frequent asides about the family and a long description of an extended birthday event. Only once does she move from noting some of Withers' mild eccentricities to a firm indictment. She recounts how in her earliest days as a local member fielding public outrage at the proposal to resume correctional activities at Boggo Road, Withers happened to answer a phone call from a constituent with a blunt expletive - 'fuck off' - before hanging up. Forced to clean up this mess, Bligh mildly notes that 'Greg had a deep interest in politics but little interest in the niceties that its practice sometimes requires'. (p.100). Bureaucratic colleagues of Withers would have used stronger language, suggesting his self-indulgence in 'ignoring niceties' would have been openly condemned if he had not been regarded as a protected species. By contrast, Newman felt that his wife was always regarded as fair game for the media pack.

The key distinction from the Newman/King book is that Bligh knew from very early on that she wanted to experience political leadership as a reward for her intelligence and hard work. She wanted to climb that greasy pole which was overlaid with sexist prejudices. Because others saw in her the same potential, particularly Anne Warner and then Peter Beattie, she served a systematic apprenticeship from student politician, a year in a challenging industrial workplace and then up the rungs of party preferment. She was the consummate 'professional politician'. Despite his family background, Newman was an amateur by comparison. And, being a hardened professional, Bligh was reconciled to losing at some point, able to rest content on her laurels and display no bitterness.

Anna Bligh and Michael O'Neill

The career of Anna Bligh coincided with the bulk of the career of a lower-ranked public servant, a social worker toiling away in the bowels of the Department of Transport as an employee adviser. Michael O'Neill was not often in the public eye, even though I am sure he was a prominent figure within the milieu of his own Human Resource Management context, where he was an outspoken

critic of management and especially of the ill-judged experiment in creating a central organisation to provide shared services.²

His autobiography could not be more different from Bligh's: not at all sunny, not at all a coherent narrative and not at all easy to read. He was certainly no protected species: a genuine intellectual with a powerful command of language which adds vigour and discomfort to his specific complaints and to his wider analysis of bureaucratic life.

The specific complaints related to the responses provided to a particular email which detailed the futility and pain experienced by a series of his clients within the organisation whom he encountered in his professional calling as a social worker. Sending this email across the entire HRM network of a large department activated wholly predictable hostility from his immediate superior and complex game-playing by others brought into the network of responses. These are recounted in almost overwhelming and occasionally over-repetitive detail.

The more general complaint arose from his first-hand experience of organisational restructuring associated with the development of the 'shared services' approach to the delivery of a range of services. The author analyses the fallacies associated with the general approach that the private sector could provide all the answers to the perceived problems of the public service and with the specific idea that grouping apparently similar activities in diverse departments could create savings arising from the economies of scale of delivering the same service centrally. He offers both the general analytical limitations of this approach and the practical experience of living with its consequences, particularly the Treasury requirement to develop a mechanism for internal costings which proved utterly nonsensical.

The end was predictably inevitable in such conflicts between a recalcitrant individual and a strong organisational culture suppressing open dissent. O'Neill ended up dissatisfied and ultimately unemployable. The local event inside the HRM department made him a sitting duck for translation into the Shared Services central structure in order to get him out of the way in the home department. When the Shared Services experiment proved the fiasco he had predicted and staff were identified for returning to their original location, he was unwanted in either location. After a period in 'never-never land' he realised that his only sensible choice was to accept a redundancy.

One of the commentators on the publisher's website captured the flavour of the book:

This book is both fascinating and instructive. The author has thought deeply about organisational life and the power of institutions and their effect on people working in them. He enlivens his comments and descriptions about his personal experiences in Queensland institutions by including quotes and ideas from the thoughts of Sophocles in his Oedipus plays; the philosophy of a Mediaeval theologian and the insights of American playwright Arthur Miller.' (Monique Bond)

The publication is the fruits of his labour between early retirement and an untimely death. The whole O'Neill clan (and their talented spouses) can all write with wit, erudition and insight and Michael is no exception. However this is not so much a book as two books and an archive. Internal evidence indicates that the first half was clearly intended for separate publication from the second and both suffer from the lack of editorial discipline which was snatched away by the desire to press on quickly so the book could stand, as it does, as a potent memorial and reminder of the style and substance of its author. The desire to let the facts on the public record provide testimony for future generations means that there is frequent repetition when original documents are reproduced in toto after or before the main points have been advanced in the narrative.

That said, this is still an important book and deserves wide attention, particularly from students of social work contemplating or engaged in a public service career and from political scientists and organisational theorists for the insights O'Neill provides into the world of the public service he inhabited under Goss, Beattie and Bligh. It will provide succour to those having the same sort of

² The Queensland Government initiative to enable integrated service delivery for whole-of-Government. Services such as financial services, information technology, and human resource management.

experiences at his level in the current public service and warnings to those inhabiting the higher levels of politics and administration.

A personal postscript

Even though I had never met Michael O'Neill, I attended a function which was simultaneously an Irish wake, a jazz concert and a book launch in the reliably progressive environment of a West End public library.

One speech ended up in good Hibernian fashion with a song, but the singer made a moving speech:

In the book, the writer's voice is unmistakably Michael's voice. For anyone who knew Michael, in tone and temperament the words roll and tumble off the page as if he was sitting in front of you speaking.

For me, Michael was like a literary protagonist come to life with all the attendant gravitas and human foibles. The difference being that Michael was not made-up at all. There was nothing fictitious about him. He was for real. As real, as knowledgeable, as tenacious and uncompromising, as self-effacing, digressive and funny, as compassionate and courageous as the Michael in this book. In real life, to get the most out of Michael, it was as if you had to suspend everything you knew about operating in the so-called 'real' world and enter into the novel that was his life. There was (there is) no one like him. It is why it is so hard for those who love him to be without him.

The book is in two parts. The first part reads like a thriller. It is a scarcely believable account of the dodgy strategies management implemented to first silence, and then rid themselves of, their one-and-only troublesome staff counsellor.

In the process, the story unpacks many maladies affecting large modern-day organisations. These include Pollyannaism, the abuse of power, and bullying. The story also chronicles the ethical and cultural atrophy of the public service. This is the result of the introduction into the service of private sector practices. No one escapes Michael's forensic analysis. Not even himself. And anyone who works in a large organisation is likely to find themselves somewhere in the story as protagonist, antagonist, foil, victim, or supporting character of one kind or another.

The second part of *Michael, we really have to talk ...* is a practical toolkit of how to survive ethically in a large organisation and win battles along the way. He writes that 'they (the tools) all look different and there is one you cannot see. It's courage. Choosing it and using it is a skill like any other. You can call it a virtue, if you prefer, a virtue one decides to own, and every such decision nails it to you mast afresh. Know the terrain, of course. Then stand.'

Having this book published posthumously is therefore tinged with the same quality of sadness that seemed to accompany Michael throughout his life. I say quality because Michael's sad life had the quality of a work song. He knew his inner suffering could not be taken away, so he learned to sing it instead. (Robert Perrier)