

Anderton: His Life and Times.

By David Grant.

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Reviewed by Len Richardson

David Grant's life and times study of Jim Anderton raises fundamental questions about the nature of the New Zealand Labour Party that he first explored in his study of "Big Norm". Central to both biographies is the issue of leadership and its connection to the collectivist notions that have underpinned the Labour Party since its inception. From Harry Holland, a leader who did not believe in leadership, to the arrival of the eloquent David Lange (1983–1989) this collectivist ethos remained dominant if somewhat eroded by the experience of office and underlying social change. When the party's fourth prime minister died in office in 1975 his death, as Grant has demonstrated, brought working-class leadership of the Labour Party to an end. The rise of Rob Muldoon's National government that followed added urgency to the quest for a new leader capable of extending Labour's electoral appeal. Their choice was David Lange, an Auckland lawyer whose eloquence, wit and debating skills were fashioning a formidable parliamentary reputation.

Jim Anderton's political career unfolded within this shift and was, in large part, defined by the tumultuous events that ultimately engulfed the Labour government and left deep scars across the labour movement. Political commentators have described Anderton from two perspectives: as either the saviour of the Labour Party's soul or as an embarrassing, stormy petrel driven as much by personal ambition as any consistent political principle. By closely tracing his political emergence from within the Auckland labour movement Grant neatly delineates the motives, personal and political, that shaped the colourful and complex public figure that Anderton became.

Lange's style of leadership depended heavily upon his personality and a reliance upon others to give heft to the government he led left him peculiarly exposed to manipulation by more organised fractions of the Party. And it is within the unravelling of Lange's government in the wake of the neo-liberal turn engineered by Roger Douglas that Jim Anderton emerges as major political figure. His parting shot, as he parted company with Labour and launched New Labour in 1989, that he was not so much leaving the Labour Party as the party leaving him, became a rallying call that resulted in the formation of a democratic socialist alternative to the Labour Party. To some extent participants in the disintegration of the Fourth Labour government have already begun to set the history straight. The late Michael Cullen, in his memoir *Labour Saving*, suggests that in the struggle for influence within the Lange government "Anderton had given criticism and the championing of alternatives a bad name." His public criticism came to look, he suggests, "all too much like seeking martyrdom." If only, Cullen comments regretfully, Anderton had "played a longer, and more publicly loyal, game" he "may well have ended up as Leader of the party at some point."

Viewed from a purely party-constitutional perspective, Anderton's argument with the Lange government hinged, as Peter Franks and Jim McAloon remind us, "upon whether Labour candidates' pledges to support party policy were more or less binding than their pledges to vote in accordance with caucus decisions." Such was the anger generated by the ideological turn engineered by Roger Douglas that such niceties counted for little. The animosities ran deep and the verbal sparring continued after Lange had sacked Douglas as his Minister of Finance in an attempt to call, if not time, then at least a pause for a 'cuppa' and an end to ideological

fanaticism. In this context, David Grant describes as “bizarre” Anderton’s description of Michael Cullen, Lange’s replacement for Roger Douglas as Minister of Finance, “as an ex-Christ’s College kid running Labour’s finance policy”.

David Grant makes abundantly clear that there was a great deal more than political ambition to Jim Anderton. The complexities and ambiguities revealed fully in David Grant’s biography transcend the shallow characterisations of a purely political market place and enhance our understanding of both the man and his times. To those who follow the fortunes of recent Australasian labour parties, Anderton’s loyalties resemble those publicly espoused by the current Labor prime minister of Australia, Anthony “Albo” Albanese: the Catholic Church, the ALP and the South Sydney rugby league club, the ‘Rabbitohs’. Albanese attributes no particular hierarchy of importance.

Anderton would have recognised a kindred spirit. Catholicism formed the basis of an early social activism that led the young Anderton into social work, defined a conservative social stance on many moral issues and a political position within the Labour party that was reformist rather than revolutionary and slotted neatly into the Labour party of Norman Kirk and Bill Rowling. At first glance place seems to play a more ambiguous role in Anderton’s thinking than it does for “Albo.” A middle-class Aucklander throughout his formative years (1938 to 1984), he lived more than half his life in the northern city before making Christchurch his home after winning the Sydenham seat in 1984. But, as David Grant makes abundantly clear, his particular fusion of conservative social values and working-class sympathies quickly bred reciprocal loyalties with deep roots in the local community that extended beyond those of Catholicism and labour supporters. Nothing encapsulates this better than his dogged and successful campaign alongside National Party stalwart and Anglican, Philip Burdon, to save the Anglican cathedral from demolition. One wonders where Jim Anderton might have aligned himself in current debates within the Christchurch Catholic community about plans to build a new cathedral at the heart of the city and, as some would have it, a reminder that Catholic Christchurch could no longer be out-of-sight, out-of- mind and down by the gasworks.

David Grant has provided us with a rounded “warts and all” portrait that will help us understand how Anderton might have responded to the issues involved in the current imbroglio. Above all else, the Jim Anderton we meet in Grant’s study allows us to observe the complex mix of loyalties and values that shaped a life of social engagement that commanded respect well beyond the political sphere. A social conservative, middle-class, Auckland-born Catholic, who professed democratic socialist principles, he came to identify with and be accepted widely within the nation’s southern capital as a man who had immersed himself in their community and earned their respect.