

The problem of staffers

Richard Allsop reviews

Power Without Responsibility

by Anne Tiernan
(UNSW Press, 2007
304 pages)

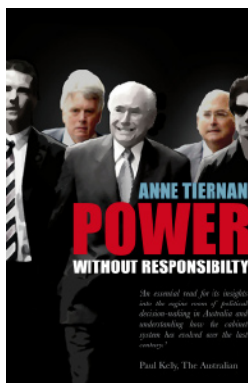
It is best not to judge this book by its cover. A darkened John Howard in the foreground, with two key staffers highlighted in the background and a quotation that says the author ‘shines light into some of the darker corners of government’ certainly gives the impression that the reader will get the usual Howard-hating, threat-to-democracy screed.

Although the book does devote a perhaps disproportionate amount of space to what the children overboard issue revealed about staffing, Anne Tiernan’s work overall provides quite a balanced account of how ministerial advisers have grown both in numbers and importance at the federal level in the past 35 years.

She takes her narrative back to the election of the Whitlam Government and explains that, after 23 years in Opposition, Whitlam and his ministers wanted to avoid ‘being “run” by Canberra’s permanent public service elite’ and so wanted ‘to seek alternative sources of policy advice’. Hence, the modern adviser, located in the ministerial office, was born.

At times, as she traces the history through successive governments, the work reads a little too much like an extended literature review. Better to err too much on the side of recognising previous work in a field, however, than appear oblivious to it. There is also plenty of original material, gleaned from interviews with past

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and present staffers and members of the press gallery, almost all of whom appear anonymously.

Another pleasing aspect of her work is that she has looked at the examples of other countries (US, Britain and Canada). This seems an obvious thing to do, but many writers on public policy seem to operate in a nationalistic vacuum.

Tiernan touches on the differences between federal and state ministerial office arrangements, but could have devoted more space to this topic. The collocation of ministerial offices and departments at the state level clearly changes the dynamics, generally for the better. The geographic isolation from departments federally probably contributes to the greater use of public servants as Departmental Liaison Officers, a measure that blurs what should be clear distinctions between ministerial staff and public servants. Another questionable practice, seemingly more prevalent at the federal level, is ministerial staff signing correspondence. On the other hand, one feature of state governments that fortunately has not been replicated at federal level is the centralised media unit.

For Tiernan, the foundation principle of staffing is that the ministers would take responsibility for their staffs’ actions. She sees that principle breaking down under the Howard Government in

the cases of travel rorts and children overboard. The actions of Peter Reith’s media adviser, Ross Hampton, in relation to the latter, are examined forensically. A little less focus on this hobby-horse issue and a touch more on, for instance, the role of advisers in the budget process would have rounded out the book better.

More problematic than the actions of individual advisers in particular situations is the role of bodies such as the previous Labor Government’s National Media Liaison Service or the current Government’s Government Members Secretariat. They get off surprisingly lightly.

Adding to my initial trepidation about this book was the fact that it forms part of the Australia and New Zealand School of Government series on contemporary issues in Australian government, politics and public management. Maybe my reluctance was unfair, since I had read only one other book in the series, but *The Australian Electoral System: Origins, Variation and Consequences* was so full of basic factual errors and inaccessible language that one had to be sceptical about its companion volumes.

Anne Tiernan has produced a much better book. It retains the annoying social science habit of previewing things before actually saying them, but otherwise it is a well-researched and well-written contribution. It could be particularly useful for anyone contemplating a career as a political staffer.

Power Without Responsibility may not provide all the right answers, but at least it asks most of the right questions.

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