

BOOKS &amp; ARTS

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# WHEN DO WE GET STUCK INTO THEM?

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*Books* | Former NSW Labor MP Carl Scully settles old scores in a vivid account of life in Macquarie Street

Right:

Back in the hot seat: former NSW Labor MP Carl Scully outside the Independent Commission Against Corruption in November 2013 after giving evidence about former Labor powerbroker Eddie Obeid. Dean Lewins/AAP Image



## Setting the Record Straight

By Carl Scully | *Published by the author*

Carl Scully was a Labor member of the NSW parliament from 1990 to 2007. After becoming a minister following Bob Carr's victory in the 1995 election, he held a series of senior portfolios and was a contender for the premiership when Carr resigned in 2005. Not a person burdened by self-doubt and introspection, he makes clear that this memoir gives his side of the story and doesn't spare his adversaries. *Setting the Record Straight* is an unashamedly personal account – and if the perpendicular pronoun is too prominent at times, it is still an engaging read.

Scully has a gift for narrative and an eye for an amusing anecdote. He paints a vivid picture of the raw realities of political life: the adrenalin-pumping highs and gut-wrenching disappointments; the sheer bastardry and the acts of magnanimity; the satisfaction of changing people's lives for the better and the frustration of being unable to implement necessary reform.

He also gives important insights into the political machinations and inner processes of the Carr government. Carr is one of the few characters to emerge from Scully's account in good shape. In a revelation that leaps out of the page, we learn that the Labor Party's state secretary and the premier's chief of staff conducted twice-yearly audits of all portfolios with each minister's chief of staff and head of media. So much for ministerial responsibility and the career public service.

Born in 1957, Scully grew up in a less salubrious part of Sydney's north shore. His family were lower-middle-class, Labor-voting Catholic battlers. Young Carl showed drive and ability, and went

on to study law and become a solicitor. Fascinated by politics, he never wavered in his desire to become a Labor parliamentarian, and he had the hunger and the toughness that made for success. He also had a risk-taking streak: “Cautiousness in politics is a worthy tool of management,” he writes, “but an overabundance of it can lead to a stifling lack of boldness and lost opportunities.”

Scully describes, sometimes unwittingly, how the cancer of factionalism was eating into the Labor Party. After declaring that he was motivated to enter politics by a desire to serve the community, he proceeds to give a detailed account of the years of concerted factional warfare he waged to become MP for Smithfield – but makes no mention of any time spent developing ideas or policies. When he arrived in Macquarie Street, he asked his colleagues, “When do we get stuck into them?” He meant the party’s left, and it had to be explained to him that his enemy was now the Coalition.

Scully soon realised that finding factional backing rather than demonstrating ability was the path to promotion. Eddie Obeid provided just that, through his Terrigal sub-faction (named after the location of Eddie’s beach house), which had been formed with the cooperation of Labor head office to counter the dominant right Trog (from troglodyte) group. Scully shows how Obeid garnered ambitious acolytes like himself by professing a disinterested desire to further their careers. At one point Obeid told Scully that he was only staying in politics to see him become premier, a line that Carl unfortunately swallowed whole. Scully boasts of the Terrigals’ success in creating a powerful sub-faction by the time Labor won the 1995 election: “It had been,” he writes, “a very good four years’ worth of work.”

Obeid and his henchman Joe Tripodi came to exert a stifling degree of control over preselection, caucus, cabinet and ultimately the leader. Their grip facilitated corruption and played a large part in destroying the Labor government in 2011.

Much of Scully’s time as minister was spent at Roads and Transport. He gives a revealing account of life at the top: punishing hours; a constant flow of paper work; a demanding premier; a critical media; battles with private contractors and powerful bureaucracies; fights with Treasury and its minister, Michael Egan; the need to deal with serious rail accidents. In spite of all this, he delivered major infrastructure projects and valuable road safety reforms, and presided over the much-praised performance of the transport network during the 2000 Olympics.

Perceptively, Scully says that Carr acted as non-executive CEO, intervening only when a major problem occurred, and made treasurer Egan, Scully’s *bete noire*, chief operating officer. It is ironic that the latter is exactly the role Scully was best suited for. Few would deny that he was a talented and hard-working minister. But many would agree that he could be abrasive and opinionated, traits that don’t make for a successful leader but can be useful in a treasurer. Scully was also hamstrung by the drastic decline in the performance of the railways from the late 1990s. He does give an intriguing account of how the Byzantine complexities of a rail restructure implemented after Carr came to office – in the name of efficiency – handicapped him. Nonetheless, the bottom line, as Scully admits, is that the minister has to cop it from the media and the public.

**A**ll of this meant that, other than in his own mind, Scully had no realistic chance of succeeding Carr. His obsessive drive for the job caused him and others much grief. He even

spent a considerable amount of time developing an agenda to implement in office. To this day, he appears utterly convinced that he was the person for the job. When he heard that Carr had announced his resignation, he records, “I immediately felt an enormous surge of electricity through my body. I had campaigned for this day for just over ten years and now my time had come.”

Then comes a painfully honest account of his realisation that Obeid, Tripodi and Labor secretary Mark Arbib had already decided that Morris Iemma was the best choice if Labor was to win the next election. He was bludgeoned into withdrawing from the race by his “mates,” and made his resentment and disappointment plain. In October 2006, Iemma sacked him as police minister for twice misleading parliament in a minor way – offences he could without impropriety have overlooked.

Scully was seen by the new premier and his advisers as too much of a liability. He considered retreating to the backbench to plot a comeback, perhaps even as premier (hope springs eternal!), but finally decided to leave parliament at the 2007 election – a decision he says he regrets. He concludes with a swingeing attack on Iemma’s premiership; leaving aside the bile, he makes some valid points, particularly about the botched and destructive attempt to privatise electricity.

Scully has self-published his account, and this has resulted in misspellings, stylistic inconsistencies and solecisms. The manuscript could have used a good edit to tighten it up and remove repetition and digression. On the whole, however, this a worthwhile book that makes an important contribution to the literature on NSW politics. •

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