

The truth about David and me

5:00 AM Saturday Jun 28, 2008

Working with David, Michael Bassett's account of his part in the life of David Lange, comes heavily weighted with the trappings of scholarship, and its author hasn't stopped short of proclaiming his lingering affection for David in support of his claim to objectivity. Let's have none of that here. No, the first time I ever met Dr Michael Bassett I felt my flesh creep. It's plain from the book that I did a poor job of hiding it.

I got to know only one or two of the faction in the caucus which helped propel David to the leadership of the Labour party in 1983, but David knew them well enough. When, as prime minister, he broke with his finance minister Roger Douglas, it was my instinct to blame Douglas, or at least his office, for the bile which flowed around the place, but David was always more likely to make allowances. "You've got to remember," he said to me once about Douglas, "he's got Bassett riding him".

Working with David does much to suggest that David hit the mark. The writing is purple, overheated, even foam-flecked. The method is unusual for a scholarly work. It starts with an idea or, more often, with a slur, and looks for facts which back it up. If the author can't find any facts, he makes something up.

This is the book's idea of me: I was a rigid and old-fashioned Labour supporter, an old-style socialist, ideologically opposed to the economic changes of the 1980s. Taking advantage of the prime minister's infatuation, I seized my chance to bend him to my will, leading him to fall out with his finance minister while I took control of his office and brought about the destruction of the fourth Labour Government. It's not surprising that reviewers have resorted to asking if the author could possibly be serious.

Sadly, it seems he is, so let me record that almost everything he writes about me is either untrue or inaccurate. Take the socialism, for a start. It's makes no difference to me to be called a socialist, even of the rigid sort, but it does considerable damage to the Bassett argument if it turns out that I never was.

I first voted in a general election in 1972, when I lived in the Karori electorate, and I voted for Jack Marshall, leader of the National Party. I didn't vote Labour until 1981. Like many others, I moved away from the National Party in the second half of the 70s, but, again like many others, I was prompted by social rather than economic issues. When I applied for a job in the Labour Party's parliamentary research unit in 1982, I couldn't make any claim to Labour activism.

My late arrival to Labour politics was never any secret, and the first complaints I heard about myself when I went to work in David's office when he became Leader of the Opposition in 1983 were not that I was a closet socialist. "They think I've got a Tory working for me," David said to me.

I had no difficulty with the economic reforms carried out in the first term of the fourth Labour Government after 1984. I thought they were breathtaking in their radicalism, but almost everyone thought that, whether in agreement with them or not. You won't find any speech I wrote in that first term of government which wasn't supportive of the broad aims of economic policy, or which was less than admiring of the efforts of the Government's troika of finance ministers, or which didn't celebrate the unity of purpose embodied in the partnership between Lange and Douglas. It seems that Bassett found some of my writing rather damp around the edges, but it was after all David's job to present the Government's economic policy as something more than merely ruthless.

The happy collaboration between Lange and Douglas came to an end when David began to lose faith in his finance minister, and there is no doubt when that happened. In March 1987 Douglas sent him a set of proposals for his next budget. The last of them, which Douglas described as his preferred option, would be



Michael Bassett's new book 'The truth about David and me' suggests Lange knew his caucus well, writes Margaret Pope. Photo / Martin Hunter

recognised by anyone with an interest in politics as a draft manifesto of the Act Party, which Douglas later founded. It was a blow to David. He could not support it, and he knew very well that no major party, let alone the Labour Party, could sustain that agenda and remain a force in politics.

The Douglas camp could never afford to concede that David's objection to the scheme was one of principle. All three of the alternative arguments his opponents devised to explain his growing unease with Douglas are rehearsed at great length in *Working with David*.

The first argument has it that David's rejection of the original plan was simply the result of a misunderstanding. He took it far too seriously. The last proposal was only a bargaining strategy. It was Roger being Roger, and he didn't really mean it. This is absurd, as everything that happened afterwards showed that Roger meant every word of it.

The second argument is used by Bassett in partial explanation of David's public repudiation of the flat rate of income tax, which Cabinet adopted on Douglas's recommendation at the end of 1987. It suggests that David resented Douglas's reputation as the architect of the economic reforms and his status as the driving force behind the Government.

If David did begrudge Douglas his achievements, I never heard him mention it, and it's odd that it came on him so suddenly after close to three years of rejoicing in his ministerial partnership with Douglas.

Bassett's third explanation for David's unreasonable and otherwise inexplicable dismissal of the ACT manifesto is me, of course. I made him do it.

Setting aside all question of my socialist motive (and I'm sure Bassett will, once he thinks of another one), this scenario has a major problem to overcome. In Bassett's thesis, David was infatuated with me almost from the moment we met, in 1982. This leaves Bassett with the task of explaining why it took me the better part of five years to take control.

The answer, it seems, lies in David's state of health. Around the time of the 1987 general election, he became unwell. Illness clouded his judgment and made him vulnerable. He abdicated his responsibilities, abandoned his faithful colleagues and left his Government to the rule of his lover _ goodness, it's not easy to write like this. I do wonder how Bassett maintained the rage for close to 600 pages.

But it brings us close to the most detestable slur in this detestable book. Its author piles these burdens on David: the demoralisation he felt around the time of the 1987 election and onwards, the depression from which I think he sometimes suffered, and the drinking which came close to destroying him (although not, as Bassett alleges, while he was prime minister, but afterwards) _ and asks the reader to believe that it was these which caused him to repudiate Roger Douglas.

In truth it was the other way around. From the time he reshuffled his Cabinet after the 1987 election, and sacked Bassett from the health portfolio, he was the target of a campaign of smear and innuendo which is resurrected in the pages of *Working with David*. Here it is in text, just as it used to be in life. It increased in its viciousness and intensity after David went over the head of his Cabinet colleagues and put an end to the flat rate of tax at the start of 1988.

David knew exactly what would happen to him when he dumped the flat tax. He knew the right of his party would turn on him. He had no links to the old left, and absolutely no interest in establishing them. Many of the key figures of the modern centre left were active in politics then, but there were many bridges to burn, or cross, before they ever became a coherent force.

David bore the terrible times which followed his decision with his usual stoicism and good humour.

I'm glad he never had to see this book, and glad too that the source of the poison has so comprehensively revealed itself.