

Dino Hodge, *Don Dunstan, Intimacy & Liberty: a political biography*, Wakefield Press, Adelaide, 2014, pp. xviii + 410, illus., \$39.95. Reviewed by Malcolm Saunders

Apart from the Liberal Country League's (LCL) Sir Thomas Playford (1896-1981), no premier of South Australia has aroused so much interest or become so identified with the state as the Australian Labor Party's (ALP) Donald Allan Dunstan (1926-1999). Neither C. C. Kingston in the late nineteenth century, nor John Bannon or Mike Rann in the late twentieth century, could hold a candle to him, even though the latter were marginally longer-serving premiers. Dunstan was fortunate, insofar as he came to and stayed in power (1967-68 and 1970-79) in the wake of Playford's record-breaking premiership of more than 26 years, during which the latter's conservative governments were almost wholly concerned with industrialising South Australia's economy and reducing its dependence upon agriculture and other primary industries. Consequently, throughout the long Playford era, a wide range of issues to do with civil liberties, human rights, the constitution, education, the arts, Aboriginal people, consumers and more, were neglected. Yet, these were precisely those areas of South Australian life in which Dunstan was most interested, upon which he largely built his career and which has allowed us to look back on the 1970s as 'the Dunstan decade'. We now view the Dunstan years as having witnessed the most significant social and political (as distinct from economic) reforms in South Australian history.

Dunstan, himself, was a major factor in the ALP's ability to finally regain office in March 1965 and, save for a two-year break

in 1968-70, to retain control over the state's Treasury benches until September 1979. Although physically unprepossessing - he was short and weedy - Dunstan's abilities were tremendous. By the late 1960s, he had become an experienced parliamentarian, a compelling orator and a master at handling the media, particularly television. Charming, intellectual and forthright; with a rich, deep, resonating voice cultivated at Adelaide's elite St. Peter's College for boys and in the years spent as an amateur actor at school and Adelaide University, he was a superb performer who had a flair for the dramatic and the ostentatious. Dunstan cannot be dismissed as a mere showman, however, because he so obviously, indeed passionately, believed in what he advocated. Consequently, he built up a large personal following in his inner-suburban seat of Norwood, and a huge following throughout the state. For countless Labor supporters, it was a pleasure to see this extraordinarily gifted man demolish his opponents in parliament, in television studios, over the radio or on the hustings.

It is remarkable, then, why no one has yet published a scholarly, comprehensive, book-length biography of South Australia's most charismatic, colourful and controversial political leader. Over the decades, political scientists have analysed the Dunstan era, but not the man himself. Having said that, there are, as the author of the book under review points out, several biographies of Dunstan currently in the making. In a sense, Dino Hodge has pre-empted them all. But, his is not a typical biography, in that its main concern is to depict Dunstan as a champion of the rights of a minority group - that is, gays - and what he achieved for them before, during, and after his premierships, indeed, right up until his death in 1999. In fact, both the book's title and sub-titles are misleading because much of it doesn't mention Dunstan at all. A huge amount of space is devoted to either the emergence of 'a

homosexual culture' in South Australia from the 1910s to the 1990s, or to a police culture that not merely allowed, but encouraged, the persecution and prosecution of homosexual men (but not, incidentally, women). The melding together of these three themes is one of the book's great virtues.

Hodge takes us to a hitherto barely known mode of mid-century life in South Australia. He describes not merely the fears that male homosexuals inevitably felt in a society which regarded them with disgust and held that their sexual activities were illegal; he provides in considerable detail their haunts (or 'beats'): the hotels, beaches, cafes, bookshops and so on that they used to frequent - and even the sort of scooters they used to ride. Who would have thought that, at least as early as the Second World War, the banks of the River Torrens were a favourite meeting-place for gays? Hodge suggests that a distinct sub-culture of gays was barely discernible in South Australia in the 1930s, but was given enormous impetus by the presence of, and contact with, large numbers of American servicemen during the Second World War, and then virtually mushroomed in the immediate post-war period. It's fascinating stuff.

But, the 1950s were by no means the halcyon days of South Australia's growing homosexual community. Hodge reckons that these years were 'the darkest decade' of the century for gays throughout Australia, and that those living in South Australia had it even worse (pp.78, 98). Drawing, to a large extent, on interviews conducted by the late John Lee (d. 1997), Hodge describes a police culture in which officers of the law commonly harassed, intimidated, trapped and bashed homosexual men (culminating, of course, in the infamous Duncan case, during which a homosexual law lecturer at the University of Adelaide was drowned in the

Torrens in May 1972 by a few members of the vice squad out for their occasional exercise in ‘poofter’ baiting). Hodge describes the plight of homosexual men in Adelaide, during that era, with controlled anger and obvious sympathy; only an incorrigible homophobe could fail to be moved by his account.

Dunstan connects the two; on the one hand, he was a civil libertarian, and on the other, a developing homosexual. From an early stage of his parliamentary career - Hodge tells us, several times, that Dunstan first entered state parliament in 1953 - Dunstan was a vocal critic of the police harassment of minority groups, such as youth and Aboriginal people, which seems to have been a permanent feature of his makeup. Not so his sexual orientation, which developed from being exclusively heterosexual in the 1950s, to bisexual in the late 1960s to, more or less, exclusively homosexual by the mid 1970s. Throughout his quarter century as a state parliamentarian (1953-79), Dunstan increasingly championed the decriminalisation of homosexual acts, and later became a staunch fighter for what are now called 'gay rights'.

Hodge's book is not hagiography (although it comes close), but it is hard not to see it as hero-worship. True, a few of Dunstan's faults are admitted - such as his readiness to place trust in those not worthy of it - but these are almost passed off as virtues. More than this, Dunstan's rivals and enemies - and he had many - are either denied their due, or simply demonised. For instance, in several places, Hodge claims that Dunstan should be lauded for ending the 'gerrymander' that allowed Playford to hold on to power for so long (eg. pp.2, 143, 162). But the accolades belong not to Dunstan, but to LCL Premier Steele Hall, who in 1968 initiated legislation that provided for an incomparably fairer electoral system for South Australia. There's a sense that Hodge's antipathy towards the

conservative and homophobic forces of the day - the LCL, the police, the *Advertiser* (particularly its leading feature-writer, Stewart Cockburn) - blinded him to some essential truths.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Hodge's lengthy and frank analysis of Dunstan's shock resignation as premier in February 1979. This followed Dunstan's *annus horribilis* of 1978, where his physical and mental health were strained by firstly, having to defend his government's sacking of Police Commissioner Salisbury in January 1978, and secondly, from the need to nurse his second wife (the young, beautiful, Malaysian-born Adele Koh) for much of that year. But, Hodge concedes that Dunstan 'dissembled' about why he was resigning, and effectively argues that the decisive factor was the fear, especially in the Premier's Department, that a soon-to-be published book, *It's Grossly Improper*, penned by 5DN radio journalists Des Ryan and Mike McEwen, would cause enormous political and electoral damage to the government if Dunstan was to try to stick it out and stay on as premier.

This is all very well - as far as it goes. But, Hodge's explanation is that the book, by highlighting Dunstan's long relationship with one John Ceruto, would reveal the premier to be gay, arouse homophobic feeling against both the premier and his government, and even further alienate the working-class vote. This might be credible, but, to adapt a phrase, it's grossly misleading. For a start, this reviewer's perception at the time was that knowledge of Dunstan's bisexuality was widespread and had not prevented him from achieving impressive victories at state elections in 1973, 1975 and 1977. More importantly, the crux of Ryan and McEwen's book was not that while married, and at a time when homosexual acts were illegal, Dunstan was 'having it off' with a man as unsavoury as Ceruto; rather, it was that Dunstan was

using his position to do favours. He had, in fact, been providing considerable patronage over several years to a man who was almost universally loathed, if not despised - especially by Dunstan's closest 'minders' (curiously, Hodge can't bring himself to admit that Dunstan and Ceruto were lovers; the former is referred to as an 'alleged partner'. See p.xiv).

For Hodge to dismiss *It's Grossly Improper* as 'scandal-mongering' (p.322), as most Dunstan loyalists have done before him, is an injustice to the authors of that thoroughly researched and vetted, little book. The irony is that Hodge's much lengthier work, based on a doctoral thesis, tells us incomparably more about Dunstan's sex life than Ryan and McEwen's book ever did. In fact, it's a real eye-opener. From the journalists we learn little more than that Dunstan, from 1966, had a long, sexual relationship with a man, while ostensibly having an exclusively heterosexual one with his wife; from Hodge we learn that, since the late 1960s, Dunstan pursued numerous sexual relationships with both sexes at the same time. Indeed, Hodge, who declines to regard Dunstan as gay, describes him as having been a 'polyamorist' (p.304). What Hodge doesn't do is explore how Dunstan's sexual liberationism (rather than his homosexual relationships) and upper-middle-class lifestyle, that he virtually paraded, might have contributed to his alienation from the working-class supporters on whom his party depended.

As the foregoing suggests, this is a long but engrossing book. Its bibliography is highly impressive, its many photographs are very revealing and its style, in spite of the occasional hint of postmodern jargon, is almost always readily comprehensible. There are a few factual errors - the whole book could have benefited from more rigorous editing - but they don't detract much from the

author's purpose. No one seriously interested in the political and social history of post-war South Australia could afford to ignore this work. On the whole, it's an extraordinary book written from an unusual, but justifiable, perspective on a man who is always likely to remain one of South Australia's 'greats'.