Nick Greiner's resignation as NSW premier in June provoked very different responses, not only about Greiner himself, but also about the role of the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC). Rodney Cavalier argues that the myth of the prevalence of corruption in NSW which Greiner helped to propagate led him to create a monster. But Brad Norington says Greiner was essentially honest, if unable to live up to his own high standards.

Central to the public face of Nick Greiner from the time he took over the leadership of the conservative parties in NSW in 1983 was the conviction that he was going to be in government and remain in government only for as long as he could do things. Good government was about good management, fulfilling the party's program. The occupation of the Treasury benches for its own sake was an anathema for the apostles of a new era Liberalism.

The reactionary forces which have gained undisputed control of the various parliamentary Liberal parties across Australia like to pillory the record of Malcolm Fraser, a man and a government they have reduced to a chasm of Lost Opportunity. Too enamoured of the parliamentary institution, the argument runs, Fraser and Co. failed to implement the party platform—notwithstanding a record majority and control of both Houses.

Just as the government of Gough Whitlam provided by negative example a cautionary tale for the wary treads of every Labor government that has followed, the perceived failures of Fraserism have motivated the waking dreams of Liberals contemplating the purposes of government. Only in NSW have the conservatives enjoyed the opportunity to follow through on their promise. By mid-1988—and it is difficult now to recall—Greiner was the future for Conservative Australia.

It has not turned out that way. Greiner lost his absolute majority in the NSW parliament in May 1991. This was a most remarkable achievement. In 1991, at the end of the Greiner government's first term, it had a favourable electoral distribution, the electoral laws had many clever rorts that invalidated obvious Labor votes, and all the media was on-side and presenting the outcome as inevitable. Not for 60 years had the NSW electorate denied a government a second term.

In fact, premiers seeking a mandate of renewal after returning their parties to government had won with landslides—Stevens in 1935, McKell in 1944, Askin in 1968, Wran in 1978. Yet the electorate had rejected Greinerism. The dimensions of the task facing Labor, combined with the electoral system, denied either side a majority. From that rejection Greiner did not ever recover. The agenda of the first three years gave way to a patchwork of deals with independents in the state lower house and Christian 'morals' crusaders in the upper house.

This desperation to cling onto office was the wellspring of the inducement to Liberal defector Terry Metherell to resign his parliamentary seat in order to take up a highly paid government job. As an independent, Metherell occupied a particularly strategic place in a parliament in which neither of the two main parties held a majority of seats. In one stroke all the Greiner government's humbug about appointments on merit and a government committed to a new and higher standard of public administration were forfeit. What none of Greiner's advisers had calculated was the obloquy which the public held former education minister Metherell. It was a longstanding miscalculation that went back to the beginnings of the Coalition government in 1988. By inducing Metherell to resign his seat, most of the obloquy transferred to the government itself.

Greiner's involvement in the inducement was intimate. Every aspect of its execution was within Greiner's ken. To initial inquiries Greiner displayed characteristic flippancy. His limited vocabulary has always been a problem—his adjectival range extends from 'monumental' through 'sham' and 'absolute' (perhaps 'bloody' when he wanted to express inordinate annoyance). His only strong noun is 'nonsense'. Under pressure he has tended to flail these words as a substitute for a thoughtful response. His diction was his entrapment.

Given the government's preoccupation with regaining control of the floor of the lower house, the Legislative Assembly, the inducement set off the forces that could destroy a minority government. If the government had held control of the lower house, the demands for a further explanation would have died after an indicative vote on the floor. Without that control, the Assembly could take the matter just as far as a majority wanted. The government was not going to be in charge of what happened. The purpose of the inducement was to reverse the numbers; in the short term, until and unless a by-election returned a Liberal MP, the resignation of Metherell placed the government in further peril.

With talk in the air of a reference to the Independent Commission Against Corruption—Greiner's own creation—and faced with a probable defeat on the floor of the House, the government seemed to believe that it was addressing the problem by making its own reference to the Commission. The question of no confidence had to wait until the Commission returned its finding. Or so the government argued. Their arguments handed the fate of their own Premier to the form of words that the Commissioner chose to employ. Given the predilection of Ian Temby for evocative phrases—Temby is no slouch in the vocabulary department—it was certain that the ultimate finding was going to be unequivocal.
At that stage, the government was entitled to expect the loyalty of Terry Metherell. How wrong they were.

Through 1988 and 1989 when Metherell was by far the government’s most unpopular minister, Greiner had offered Metherell unqualified support and loyalty when a smarter man might have cut him adrift. Greiner owed Metherell nothing; offering anything was going to cost Greiner plenty in terms of his personal regard; it was unlikely to solve any long-term problem on the floor of the House. Yet, having endangered his Premiership to give Metherell an exit from parliament that was both lucrative and honourable, Greiner might have felt entitled to expect that Metherell might have exhausted his capacity for vengeance.

In fact, Metherell had another twist in him. On the afternoon that parliament adjourned to await the commission’s finding, Metherell proclaimed that he had nothing to fear; the offer of an appointment was lawful and proper. A few weeks later, giving his evidence before the commission, Metherell came armed with detailed diary notes which traced the course of the inducement. The Metherell account of a telephone conversation with Greiner made clear that Metherell considered that Greiner expected improper consequences to flow from the acceptance of the proposed appointment.

Metherell’s testimony was fatal to Greiner. The inquiry had begun with the considerable brief of resolving the facts of the inducement, in tandem with deciding whether the inducement was corrupt according to the law. Within three days, once it was clear that none of the other protagonists was contesting the core of the Metherell evidence, the Commission could regard the facts as having been established. The question of law was relatively straightforward. Only one question remained: would Ian Temby provide an escape clause for the architects of the inducement? How much personal responsibility was he going to ascribe to Nick Greiner?

The report answered both questions in unmistakable language. The conduct of Greiner, Temby found, was “corrupt” in terms of the Act which he administered. The escape clause was a homily about pre-existing “standards of honesty and integrity”—the line, incidentally, that Spiro Agnew adopted when he was forced to resign as Vice-President of the United States. Greiner clutched onto those words, relying on a tortured exegesis of double-negatives by Temby to claim vindication.

Greiner’s attempt to argue at the ensuing press conference that, rather than condemning him, Ian Temby had actually vindicated him, outraged the reporters present. It sounded awful and looked awful for the audience looking on that night. Temby had, very correctly, stopped short of recommending dismissal: he recognised that was a matter for the lower house and the state governor—even though parliament had vested the commission with powers that seriously undermined Westminster notions of executive government and representative democracy.

Given all that the Independents had ever said about standards of conduct, the words of the Commission dictated only one response. The three remaining genuine Independents promptly stated that they would vote for a motion of no confidence if Greiner did not resign. Once it became clear that the majority of his colleagues took this threat seriously, Greiner accepted that he would have to resign—even though it is difficult to believe that at least one of the Independents, Clover Moore, would have cast a vote that would have either brought on an election or led to the commissioning of a Labor government.

Since his fall, many commentators, even the executors, have felt the need to pay tribute to Greiner’s personal honesty. They have criticised the powers of the commission and the disposition of Ian Temby himself. No one will go to gaol over the Metherell affair. No one should. Those who subscribe to the fantasy that New South Wales is a peculiarly corrupt place have yet to provide a shred of evidence about the victims of their defamation, evidence that might go before a jury and lead to a conviction.

The penalty for Nick Greiner was a political one; that is how a parliamentary democracy should work. Greiner had done as much as anyone to inspire the myth of the peculiar prevalence of corruption in high places in NSW; he had profited from the accusation many times over. Without his assiduous propagation of the myth he would never have become premier. A resignation forced by the prose of Ian Temby was a most poetic justice.

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