

130TH ANNIVERSARY

THE FORTIANS' UNION ANNUAL DINNER 1979

WEDNESDAY, 7 NOVEMBER 1979

INTRODUCTION OF THE HON. N. K. WRAN, Q.C., M.P.

The Hon. Mr. Justice M.D. Kirby
Chairman of the Australian Law Reform Commission

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THE PREMIER : A PUBLIC AND A PRIVATE MAN

It is my privilege to introduce this year's Guest of Honour, the Honourable Neville Wran, Q.C., M.P., Premier of New South Wales.

It is usual to start these things with the banal statement that the Guest Speaker needs no introduction. In a sense, with our guest tonight, that is true. Not a day goes by but he has some relevant announcement to make. He is a most accessible political leader : constantly commenting on this or that political theme in radio, television and magazines and newspapers.

We all know that aspect of the Premier's life. Without commenting on political matters, it is obvious that a great many people like what they see. The opinion poll in this morning's Bulletin magazine suggests that Mr. Wran's Government holds a high measure of public support. But I am less concerned with Neville Wran the Politician. In the nature of things, I can say very little about that aspect of his life. It is there. We can see it. As individual citizens, we make our own judgment on his public performance. No more of that.

As to the private man, not many are privileged to know much. He has a well-developed sense of privacy : that cherished and precious aspect of personal integrity that is often sacrificed by public men and women. The usual search through Who's Who and other like publications is of little avail to those who set out to introduce Mr. Wran to audiences such as this. Apart from mentioning his education at Fort Street and his Public Offices, there is little indeed about Neville Wran the Man. The fact is that he disdains boastful statements of the past. He is par excellence a man of the present. In a recent publication on "Notable Australians" he is the only Premier who did not submit the usual official photograph to grace its pages. Again, the details are brief and enigmatic. Not for him a lengthy list of clubs joined, exotic sporting or other pursuits or intimate insights into his reading habits and recreational activities. So far as Neville Wran is concerned, that is his business and not for the momentary titillation of those who want to breach the wall of his private persona.

It is rare today to find such qualities and it is rarer still to see them defended against the intrusive eye of the media. If the best people are to be attracted to public life, it is important that the defence of privacy and the public man should be successful, at least so far as this is compatible with being "in the kitchen".

NEVILLE WRAN AT FORT STREET

I do not propose to abuse the knowledge I have gleaned over the years of my acquaintance with our Guest of Honour. But it is legitimate, on an occasion such as this, to do just a little research. I have gone back to the School Magazine "The Fortian" for the period when the Premier was at the school. It makes fascinating reading.

Neville Wran left Fort Street in 1942. He matriculated to Sydney University and it will not surprise you to know that his best subject was Modern History. At the Leaving Certificate he was placed first in that subject. He was one of seventy one pupils who passed the Leaving Certificate that year. A quota system had been introduced to restrict entry to the University. Accordingly an abnormal number were forced to return to the school and only sixteen were admitted to the University. One of them was the Premier.

The magazine is full of news of the War. In each of the wartime editions there are poems of a patriotic flavour, short stories by young pupils who must have contemplated the dangers of war, letters from the Front by ex Fortians and sad entries to the "Roll of Honour" of those who died in action.

Anzac Day 1942 records the report that on Saturday 25 April it was the "privilege of Neville Wran to represent Fort Street at the Anzac Commemoration Service held in the Department of Education, Sydney".

"A little after 9 a.m. the Service began in the lower vestibule of the Department before the Roll of Honour on which were the names of the members of the Department who fell in the Great War and which was beautifully decorated by the girls of Fort Street with rosemary and many other flowers".

Apparently the ceremony was addressed by Captain Donald Short who was French Master at Fort Street and who talked of British hearts and British courage.

The Prizegiving and Speech Days of 1942 were attended by Mr. Clive Evatt, an Old Boy of the School, who urged the young Neville and his fellow students to "keep the torch of our school tradition always as bright as it has been". It is not recorded whether Mr. Evatt gave a half-day holiday : apparently his custom to the consternation of the stern Principals of that time.

Neville Wran passed out of the School as a Prefect. Robert Ellicott, now a Federal Minister, was one year behind. A melancholy piece by him is recorded in the 1942 edition of "The Fortian". He talks of Utopia; apparently Mr. Ellicott was also always an incipient politician.

"I wish I could think of you always, O Utopia!
But I must return now, recede from thy heights,
thy splendour and ply my sordid task on earth".
"The Fortian", December 1942, 24.

The School today is a different place, especially since the amalgamation. But when I arrived in 1951, many of the teachers were the same as those who saw out the graduating class of 1942. The Headmaster, Charles Christmas, had been succeeded by N.H. Mearns. By my time, D.J. ("Bunny") Austin was Deputy Headmaster, a position he took up in 1943. Mr. C.H. Harrison retired as Master of the English Department in 1942 but E.T. Arnold was there, as he was in 1951. F.L. ("Snaky") Burtenshaw was in the Department of Classics. Barney Roberts was the Master of the Department of Science. The continuity of great teachers is at the heart of the Fort Street tradition.

Bob Ellicott is said to have recollected that Neville Wran was something of an actor at school. Playday in 1941 was, according to the Headmaster's report for that year, a great success. The work done by Mr. Moss and other teachers needed "to be seen to be fully appreciated". It seems that the Premier took a leading part in an Irish comedy of circumstance called "Friends".

"This Irish comedy went over well, the fighting scenes particularly. Packer and Wran should apply at the Stadium for instant approval".

"The Fortian", December 1941, 16

As we all know, the Premier pursued other lines of combat but the "instant approval" did come his way, as predicted.

This was a preoccupied, worried Fort Street, with fewer photographs and constant reminders of War. The editorial of December 1942 gives the flavour. Under the Banner "Carry On" the writer says this :

"Today the destiny of Youth - of Mankind itself, seems to be the plaything of War. The horrible uncertainty of it, of its conclusion, constantly threatens us. And in the midst of this, men wander aimlessly, leaving the morrow to take care of itself. But we must carry on! ... Behind us we had the background of British tradition, a Fort Street tradition - before us the opportunity to carry this on to reach higher and greater values. ... Around us youth is dying ..."

That when I arrived in 1951, many of the "The Fortian", December 1942, 3

NEVILLE WRAN AT THE BAR

The Premier went on to academic success at the University, a prosperous practice first as a solicitor and then at the Bar and finally into Parliament.

My first experience of him as a barrister was in a workers' compensation case in Cootamundra. This was before the days of frequent air services to the country. We were required to take an evening train but the Premier suffered the indignity of sharing his sleeping car with his opponent. It was in this litigation that I saw his deep concern for ordinary people caught up in legal problems. The client was a poor meat worker. He was treated with the greatest courtesy and understanding. Not all barristers are sensitive to the predicament of the client in the thrall of litigation. Neville Wran always was. I was later his junior in many cases. He rose to be one of the leaders of the N.S.W. Bar. But he never forget the obligation to explain things patiently and in a kindly way to the people who entered his Chambers.

Later, he tended to move out of industrial injury work into more exotic fields. Even in the cases I worked with him saw him stride into argument in obscure matters of Admiralty law, local government law, liquor law and so on. When he entered political life, he was the doyen of the industrial Bar. Sought after by unions of every political persuasion, he followed in a brilliant line of Fortians appearing for the trade union movement. H.V. Evatt, John Kerr, Jack Sweeney, Neville Wran. I remember, working with him in many industrial cases. How painstaking was his preparation and how determined and resourceful was his advocacy. He appeared before the Privy Council, the High Court of Australia, the Federal Courts and every State jurisdiction. So far as the law could present laurels, he won them all.

He was a tireless worker at the Bar. His morning would begin a little after 6 a.m. and he kept up this harsh regime day in, day out. There is no better discipline for public life than the rigours of the life at the Bar. In court he was smooth in argument, clever in pitching his case not too high and deadly in cross-examination. He always kept one eye on the transcript and never sat down until he made sure that every point was there, in case he had to appeal. This wellknown care on his part kept judges at first instance on their mettle.

Then in the early 1970s he entered Parliament and his special gifts were quickly recognised, so that he moved from one Chamber to the other, to the Leadership of his Party and the highest political office of the State.

A number of Mr. Wran's Ministerial colleagues are also Fortians, including Sid Einfeld and Eric Beford. In fact, the Parliament, like the Bench, has a goodly sprinkling of Old Boys of the School. Only this morning I saw that John Dowd, who was at Fort Street when I was there, had a number of cutting, thrusting and thoroughly Fortian things to say about the Premier. The Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Mason, went to Sydney High.

Neville Wran enjoys a happy home life and his wife, Jill, has brought much credit on herself and demonstrated that in today's world the educated woman must lead her own life and be a full person in her own right. Remarkably enough, for such a talented person, Jill Wran did not go to Fort Street.

CONCLUSIONS

The Premier is a Public Man of considerable elegance who brings to his high office the scholarly traditions of our great school. He is not a man to dwell on the past : to talk of Barton, the first Prime Minister, Stevens, a former Fort Street Premier, H.V. Evatt, Spender, Barwick and so on. He is a man of the present. Similarly Fort Street school cannot live in the past but must rejoice in its present students who continue a fine tradition.

Our Guest of Honour tonight, the Honourable Neville Wran. One of Her Majesty's Counsel learned in the Law. Member of Parliament. Minister of the Crown and Premier. Private Man. Fortian.