Leadership in the Liberal Party:
Bolte, Askin and the Post-War Ascendancy

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Declaration

I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original, except as acknowledged in the text, and that the material has not been submitted in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.

Norman Abjorensen
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Abstract

The formation of the Liberal Party of Australia in the mid-1940s heralded a new effort to stem the tide of government regulation that had grown with Labor Party rule in the latter years of World War II and immediately after. It was not until 1949 that the party gained office at Federal level, beginning what was to be a record unbroken term of 23 years, but its efforts faltered at State level in Victoria, where the party was divided, and in New South Wales, where Labor was seemingly entrenched. The fortunes were reversed with the rise to leadership of men who bore a different stamp to their predecessors, and were in many ways atypical Liberals: Henry Bolte in Victoria and Robin Askin in New South Wales. Bolte, a farmer, and Askin, a bank officer, had served as non-commissioned officers in World War II and rose to lead parties whose members who had served in the war were predominantly of the officer class. In each case, their man management skills put an end to division and destabilisation in their parties, and they went on to serve record terms as Liberal leaders in their respective States, Bolte 1955-72 and Askin 1965-75. Neither was ever challenged in their leadership and each chose the time and nature of his departure from politics, a rarity among Australian political leaders. Their careers are traced here in the context of the Liberal revival and the heightened expectations of the post-war years when the Liberal Party reached an ascendancy, governing for a brief time in 1969-70 in all Australian States as well as the Commonwealth. Their leadership is also examined in the broader context of leadership in the Liberal Party, and also in the ways in which the new party sought to engage with and appeal to a wider range of voters than had traditionally been attracted to the non-Labor parties.