

Coal over ill children

Political interests 'won out'

By **MICHELLE HARRIS**
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THE NSW Labor government proved itself "immoral" in its last years by failing ill children in the Upper Hunter because it was "too beholden to the mining companies" to address dust concerns, former minister Frank Sartor says.

In his political memoir, Mr Sartor, who was environment minister in the Keneally government, said Treasurer Eric Roozendaal torpedoed efforts to develop a coal and gas mining strategy because he perceived it could be harmful to the electricity assets sale he pushed through late last year.

The Fog On The Hill is the first insider's account of Labor's descent to near annihilation at the March state election.

In it, Mr Sartor recalls travelling to Muswellbrook and Singleton in mid-2010 and finding "very compelling" the information local GP Dr Tuan Au presented about patients whose health improved when they moved out of the area.



As well as advocating a strategic approach to coalmining, Mr Sartor said he proposed a per hectare charge on exposed land near coalmines not needed for operations as an incentive for revegetation.

But it and similar measures were deferred indefinitely at Mr Roozendaal's insistence to a cabinet committee that failed to develop the mining strategy it was established to produce.

"It was at this point that I

realised that we really did not deserve to be in government," Mr Sartor wrote.

"We had kids in the Upper Hunter having trouble breathing and we were too beholden to the mining companies to do anything about it."

He decided then not to seek reelection.

Mr Sartor was also prominent in his earlier role as planning minister.

In the book, he has stood by

the 2006 Lower Hunter regional strategy developed under his watch as a sound policy.

He suggested Newcastle planning department staff used a questionable mathematical model for ranking potential development sites in the region by suitability.

The process put the Huntlee New Town development at the bottom of 91 sites, but the proposal was included in the strategy.



MEMOIRS: Left, Frank Sartor at the launch of his book, and above, Eric Roozendaal.

— Main picture by Janie Barrett

Mr Sartor said the model was not supported by the department and "had never been used before or since for such major decision making".

He provides his own proposal for improving the planning system and is highly critical of ALP party officials for seeking donations from developers, which "poisoned" the government's ability to do its job.