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JOHN SUTHERLAND 1816-1889 Builder and Politician

Wor. Bro. John Sutherland was born on 16 February 1816 near Wick, Caithness, Scotland, son of John Sutherland, crofter, and his wife Louisa.

His formal education was slight and, as one writer put it " his native shrewdness unadorned by literary ability." He trained as a carpenter and in 1838 paid his passage to New South Wales where, after early struggles, he prospered as a builder in Sydney. So much so that by the time of his retirement in 1860, aged 44, his business in Abercrombie Street, Sydney, had handled some large-scale projects. In 1866 he successfully sued the New South Wales Government for 3514.0.0 pounds for contracts carried out in 1853-54. In 1863 with John Frazer and William Manson he took up 287 square miles near Port Denison in the Bourke district of Queensland; he held another 250 square miles in South Kennedy and at Lindisfarne in North Gregory in the 1870s.

Sutherland took an early interest in politics, supporting Bro. (Sir) Charles Cowper in the 1843 Legislative Council elections. In 1857-68 and 1871-72 he represented Phillip Ward on the Sydney Municipal Council and was Mayor of Sydney in 1861. From 1860-1880 he sat for Paddington in the Legislative Assembly. He professed himself to be a "workingman's M.P." He advocated improved working conditions and wages and had cordial relations with the Trades and Labor Council; but he was more concerned with economy in public works. He supported Cowper and Bro. (Sir) James Robertson, and by opposing overseas contracts and encouraging local manufacturers he gained a "protectionist" reputation; but his attitude was pragmatic and in October 1868 he helped to defeat the protectionist Premier (Sir) James Martin. He was Secretary for Public Works under Robertson and Cowper in 1868-70 and won repute, even though his early attack on treasury procedures caused public alarm.

In the same office under (Sir) Henry Parkes he broke politically but not personally with Robertson. In the Parliamentary confusion of 1877 he refused to serve with either Robertson or Parkes, but in December reluctantly accepted the Works Portfolio in Most Wor. Bro. James Squire Farnell's ministry, and in 1878 sought efficiency in railway contracting and planning.

Sutherland had become an expert in a post that needed administrative skill and political courage and, although he debated land law reform and promoted technical education, he preferred his own field. He has been described variously as "blunt", "straight-forward, businesslike and thoroughly honest," and also "warm tempered and warm hearted", happier at his desk than on the floor of the House. He accepted the popular policy of rapid railway expansion but insisted on elaborate surveys and careful planning, and argued that local iron products would encourage Australian industry and eventually be safer and cheaper. His attitude provoked long controversy that was not helped by his lack of any real consistency of action or knowledge of political economy.

