

JOAN KIRNER

© Moira Rayner www.moirarayner.com.au. The Joan Kirner story. The Australian 2001

In her spirited defence of Wran and Hawke's move against Joan Kirner's call for a more inclusive approach to Labor's organisational arrangements, Albrechtsen gets it wrong.

Far from calling them 'feudal lords', Kirner actually wrote that, 'People have great respect for the leadership and achievements of Bob and Neville, but they wonder if a Party that bases its organisational review so narrowly is really serious about either Party reform or forming national government. There is, for example, considerable doubt as to whether Leaders who helped fashion the factional system will expose or eradicate the kind of feudal nepotism which recently bedevilled the Victorian pre-selection process.'

Kirner co-founded EMILY's List in 1996, not to set quotas but because not nearly enough women were standing or succeeding in being pre-selected as political candidates. EMILY's List gives funding, mentoring and strategic support for progressive Labor women candidates, and researches women's political concerns. It has nearly 2000 ordinary members, and 74% of Labor's women candidates who are invited to join after they have been preselected, if they are clearly committed to women's issues, community campaigning and inclusiveness. Since 1996 EMILY's List has helped 68 new women MPs into Parliaments around Australia, including the first Aboriginal woman to be elected in any Australian Parliament and the first Labor First Minister of the Northern Territory. These are impressive candidates, and I defy anyone to prove that better candidates were or would be found through the old mateship or Labor's factional quota systems. Candidates must appeal to electorate that is diverse, opinionated, 52% female and clearly underwhelmed by the current shape of the ALP. 66% of EMILY's List supported candidates won in November 2001.

Far from being 'quota-driven' or beholden to any other ideology, Kirner has a fine track record of pragmatic policy-making. If you quote what Paul Kelly wrote about Victoria in The End of Certainty, cite, too, his acknowledgement that Keating's brilliant acquisition of the State Bank for the Commonwealth came with Kirner's active support, marking the end of the ideological struggle over government ownership, as Kelly says.

Last, Joan Kirner was no failure. She became Premier at an abominable time, after Cain's shock resignation, in 1990; corporate collapses, in a recession that hit all, but Victoria worst because of its manufacturing industry, and as the new economy shifted towards Sydney: Kirner was no more responsible for the collapse of Pyramid than Bob Carr is for white-collar crime after the demise of HIH and OneTel.

Kirner was an astonishingly effective community 'politician' before she entered Parliament, where she kept true to her belief, that power comes from other people, should be used for the common good, and has to be shared.

Among her achievements were rape law reform, innovative domestic violence and seniors' programs, educational support programs that allowed parents of children with disabilities to choose mainstream education for them, if they wished, for the first time, and achieving the best school retention rates of any state, though Kennett threw this away. Had she and Heather Mitchell of the Victorian Farmers Federation not co-created it, Hawke would never have been able to build upon Victoria's innovative LandCare program and make it a national one.

Of course, if Labor wants to survive it must be inclusive. It is block-headed to view any other than unions and business are merely 'interest groups.' Albrechtsen asks, rhetorically, whether inclusiveness for its own sake is a virtue? Of course not, she tells us, because that means considering the ideas of the unskilled, untrained, uneducated, inexperienced, 'even downright dishonest.' But that is what democracy does.

