

Stacking the odds against Labor

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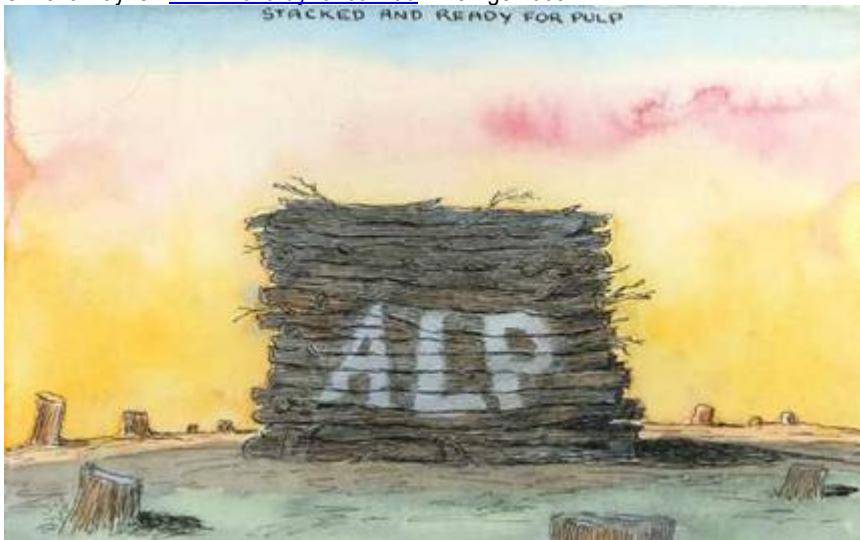


Illustration: Spooner

Factional turf wars are ruining the ALP and helping diminish the voices of liberalism, writes Moira Rayner.

Joan Kirner's call must be answered. On Monday she told *The Age* that Victoria's "rank and file" ALP branch members should rise up and insist that their party executive take decisive action against factional branch stackers. It was a brave and probably lonesome call. It was shrugged off by Victorian Premier Steve Bracks and by federal leader Kim Beazley: not a good time, not to lead.

John Cain, not Kirner's natural ally, had told the administrative committee that branch-stacking had gone so deep that one well-stacked branch, Kings Park, didn't exist. The 21st century Victorian ALP has a "rotten borough", what in 19th century England was called a "seat" with no voters that nonetheless sent political nominees to safe parliamentary seats. The committee refused to "receive" another report on branch stacking in the federal electorate of Gorton, and set up a suspect "investigation" into similar claims in Corio. It shall be dealt with in-house.

Kirner has authority. She was not only Victorian premier for two horribly difficult years, but speaks for Emily's List, which for nearly a decade has successfully guided "progressive" Labor women into Parliament. Emily's List

is not faction-bound and is therefore resented, though it works well - all its endorsed sitting candidates having won their seats again in the West Australian election. It is resented, because it encourages and financially supports women outside the club that determines Victorian preselections, of which the factional balance of the ALP's local branches is an integral part, which is why branch stacking is a blood sport.

Ah, the smell of napalm in the morning: branch stacking is the equivalent of "slashing up". It compromises the ALP's links to local communities and their concerns, and its chance of fishing out popular local candidates. With magnificent wooden-headedness, factional anglers stock their pools with loyalists, apparatchiks and malleable Parliament-fodder, the candidates that somehow fail to inspire voters.

Are there altruistic, committed and involved ALP members who will rise up? Cynics, beneficiaries of the status quo and wannabes won't. Why doesn't the ALP leadership listen?

The real question is why millions of ordinary Australians, supposedly its natural constituency, don't listen to the left, in the broad non-factional sense, at all. These are the people who don't understand "economy" talk, don't trust any politicians, and believe that the left-wing "elites" have lost touch with "the people" - and who voted accordingly last October.

Why won't they listen? "The right" may have more money and be better organised than whatever "the left" is today, which is the real issue. There is no readily identifiable progressive group today that can authoritatively deliver a disciplined message over the klaxon of the conservative - or radical - right. There is no coherent, disciplined voice that says things can be done differently.

There is a group of reasonably well-educated city dwellers who agree on a range of important current issues - against the war in Iraq, for the dignity of minority groups and just treatment of asylum-seekers; rejecting mandatory detention of children; wanting economic and social benefits such as cost-free,

first-rate health care and education, child-care and social supports; standing for the eradication of poverty, civil liberties, the rule of law and human rights. We have clear positions on abortion, gay and women's rights, racism, family values, and indigenous self-determination. We go to each other's rallies.

Yet who are our public intellectuals? In a recent poll, most of those in the top 10 wrote newspaper columns or gave TV interviews: Robert Manne, Peter Singer and Donald Horne appeared alongside Noel Pearson and Bettina Arndt - no offence meant by this juxtaposition, but they are not in their league. The voice of "the left" is barely heard and certainly doesn't make any political impression. Why is it so hard? We can't just blame the media. They won't publish left opinion that is predictable and simplistic, and which evokes no response in ordinary Australians, who believe our positions have nothing to do with their lives.

There is a reason for this. We have been through a social tsunami that started 40 years ago, with liberation - women, gays, Aboriginal and ethnic minorities - that changed our lives, from the way we look and speak to how we work and communicate and consume. The first and greatest dumper, which we underestimated, was to white men's work. Women moved out of their traditional roles, raised their awareness and became visible, vocal and equals, while men looked on in surprise, discomfort and anger. Then came the family - divorce, reproductive choices - and when gays and lesbians came out of the closet we found they were our sisters and sons. Safety nets went down under globalisation. Jobs went with new technology and competition. There has been enormous cultural change since the 1960s, urged on by development, investment, the protest movements - and some damn fine rock'n'roll.

To the majority of the people, these changes were upsetting, and to many alarming, even a frightening violation of the laws of nature or even of God as explained in the churches we used to attend. This gave the right a magnificent opportunity: to present themselves as the champion of "the people", voicing their anxieties about the pace of change, and offering a retreat to the vague certainties of "traditional values" and "the family". They gave the airwaves to

white men's rage about their loss of certainty and purpose; trained the economists of the future and created institutes, magazines and think tanks flush with money supporting right-wing writers to stir popular fear and turn it into anger against the "chattering classes". The initiative was won, and cemented in place. The left lost out to moral certainty.

The left has no nationally identifiable personalities to put another view. Internally, our own "positions" have, in a true sense, become "correct". On key social issues, our views are so ill thought through that it is easy to charge that we are out of touch with the real concerns of middle Australia.

Good on Joan Kirner for uttering the "unspeakable". It is not popular to speak out, even within Labor-governed states, because those who do become "outsiders". Not acknowledging diversity of opinions, not engaging in full and free debates, hunkering in the trenches of right and left is self-defeating.

If Victorian ALP members do not rise up, because they fear being left out and their commitment to the cause questioned, then the left as a whole is in serious trouble.

It is human to want to belong to a group, especially when times are hard. We are comforted by the company of like-minded others, especially comrades from old battles. We do not like to be called "traitor". But it is treason not to try. It is true that such debates may be seized upon by their enemies, or misrepresented. But if we cannot have those debates, we become the enemy.

Why not admit that the vast social changes of the past 40 years did have some unintended consequences? Sexual "freedom" does sometimes result in premature and nasty sexual exploitation. There is no simple answer to that evergreen issue about law and order: though we have tidily divided, the "right" into demanding more police and mandatory imprisonment and that children be punished as adults, the left response with reason, there has been no real debate. We properly argue that "lawlessness" is a furphy, with stats to prove it, but anyone who has been intimidated on a train, or knows someone whose

handbag got snatched, will give credibility to experience over "facts". Of course, divorce laws were discriminatory and women should choose when to have children and to work, but what is wrong with admitting that this sometimes makes it hard on children, too? Why shouldn't we both acknowledge that racism and poverty do drive a lot of children's anti-social behaviour, from skipping school to using drugs, getting pregnant and petty crime, and admit that, as Lillian Rubin points out in *The Transcendent Child*, such choices are not inevitable, and some kids do not create that destructive amalgam of personal behaviour, slum culture and social conditions? And do something about that?

We need to acknowledge the anguish behind the anger of white, working-class people, whose own lives of struggle and exclusion are cause for resentment. But they resent not the boss, or the government - but the "elites". Us.

There is a lot to do. We have to compete with the organised, funded network of mates in clubs, the media and with privileged access to power. Nothing will change until we can freely discuss and develop defensible positions and strategies based on progressive beliefs and values. And win the people back. The Labor Party might begin by listening to Kirner and Cain and rooting out that worm eating the heart of its rose.

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