

The worm in the rose - political incorrectness in the ALP

Wednesday, March 16, 2005

Moira Rayner

Joan Kirner's call must be answered. On Monday 14 March 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 too: not a good time, not to lead.

John Cain, not Kirner's natural ally, had told the Admin. Committee that branch-stacking had gone so deep that one well-stocked branch, King's Park, didn't exist. The 21st century Victorian ALP has a 'rotten borough', what in Victorian England described 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 re-won their seats in the WA 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 *SMH* poll most of those in the top ten 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 which started forty 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 ring writers to stir popular fear and turn it into anger against the 'chattering classes.' The initiative was won, and cemented into 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 its enemies, or misrepresented. But if we cannot have those debates, we become the enemy.

Why not admit that the vast social changes of the last forty 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 kids' 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, nor 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 their rose.

About the author

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Links

Emily's list: www.emilylist.org.au

Published Comments

No 'published comments'? Lots of words here and there about not fixing something that ain't broke - but maybe the Labour Left is victim of the Big A - a loss of memory, as those who embodied the living principles pass away. Start a new Party/Movement - utterly and radically 'left' -prepare for the inevitable shift in the economic tide from full debt-based steam ahead to...? Get to know the ground you share (locally!) with your fellow rooted-bits- of-common-old-grass,. How?

Introduce yourself to your 10 adjacent neighbours. Maybe there will be one or two happy to 'chat' about stuff. That's how it all begins. Eva Cox suggested a 'shadow cabinet' - but representing WHO? Just another lot of intellectual elite? The whole of the 'political process' needs revitalising - and although the needed leadership might initially come from 'the top', the goal should be to nurture 'local' leadership who arise from a 'community' base, as did the Labour Party, through the grassroots membership is the various Unions. As with the Unions, the keynote should be equity, with the new 'keynotes' of human rights and environmentally sustainable economic policies. Too hard? Too slow? As the Libs are fond of asking in Question Time: Do you know of any alternative policy?

Cheers - Nonnie

Sharon Robertson

Monday, March 21, 2005

I've read Joan Kirner's comments and also Moira Rayner's, and I share their disgust with the way the party is going. But Kirner and Rayner have standing in the party, whereas the poor old branch member has none. It's futile to try to do anything from the branch level. Perhaps we would be more effective by just withdrawing our labour. It's worked in other areas.

Warwick Dilley

Tuesday, March 22, 2005

Actually, I'm not a member of the ALP and my status must therefore be even lower than a branch member's. The 'left' is a broad church and I might possibly be more effective if I could only join at least one denomination. Ah, well.

Moira Rayner

Wednesday, March 30, 2005

The Labor party must admit its own death before it can be resurrected. I think this is what Moira Rayner is saying in a roundabout way. But instead all we seem to hear and read from those in its high ranks are never ending debates about who will recite the eulogy or that the party is not dead at all, just suffering a python-esque flesh wound.

Its rise from the abyss will not be made from salvaging its remains and attempting to recreate its former glories. It cannot rely completely on the spoils that come from the incumbent governments dismal failures. It will need to come from a new dream, a new voice, one that no one has yet heard but one that is mysteriously familiar to all. I sense that the freedom of discussion that Rayner has declared dead is not dead at all. It's simply off topic and not grounded. The big picture topics will

not themselves deliver Labor from oblivion. Instead it will require a grassroots movement with the people. But alas such a simple approach continues to go unheard and even dismissed as old hat. It is not.

**Please do not publish my e-mail address.*

Greg Hart

Friday, May 27, 2005