

# ALR

## MARGINS

### *Faction Friction*

**Being Victorian Premier in 1992 doesn't just mean having to deflect the blows of your opponents on the other side of the Speaker. Equally important is knowing how to bluff, cajole and otherwise bamboozle the more vociferous opposition within your own ranks. In the first week of May Joan Kirner had threatened to take her government over the cliff to an early election to quell the discontent within the Victorian Labor movement over her plans to corporatise the electricity, water and gas utilities.**

When you think about it, that is some card to play for a Government that has, on the balance of probabilities, only seven months to run. But that is the way of the Victorian ALP as it slowly blunders its way out of ten years of office. Labor in Victoria is rent by a series of schisms that, it seems, only a period in the wilderness will expunge. The schisms are the result of personal and ideological differences, the detritus of lost hopes and thwarted ambitions.

The fighting, the acrimony is around the movement in Victoria all the time; occasionally it settles on a policy vehicle and manages to become a full-blown political event.

This was the case with the Kirner government's corporatisation plan. Although the decision by cabinet and the subsequent caucus deliberations specifically ruled out privatisa-

tion, many Right and hard Left union and party officials refused to believe that the policy was anything but 'privatisation by stealth'. Essentially it came down to a matter of trust, or, more correctly, mistrust.

How has this come about? There are probably several causes. First, there are the power relationships dependent upon the full public ownership of utilities. Under benevolent state Liberal governments and the Cain Labor government, unions in the public sector grew powerful and fat. Their officials developed what might be called 'understandings' with the administrators of the authorities, leading to satisfactory wages, staffing and work practice arrangements. Any attempt to place the utilities on a more competitive, private sector-like footing threatens those power relationships.

That is perhaps obvious. What is less obvious is that factional discipline in Victorian Labor has virtually collapsed in the past two years. Since the troubles of 1985, when four Right unions excommunicated at the time of the Split returned to the fold, the once-dominant Labor Unity faction has been in decline. Its union base, which provided the bedrock for Bob Hawke's rise to national political prominence, has fallen as unions such as the Transport Workers, the AWU and the Clerks have gone over to what must be termed 'non-Right' leaderships.

A third force, nominally Left but not part of the mainstream Socialist Left, emerged at the turn of the decade. On the Right, most eyes throughout the 1980s were directed at Canberra. A big Labor Unity player, Robert Ray, gradually channelled his energies into federal power plays. This has left a vacuum that various players have attempted to fill—most notably minister David White.

White has been a key player in trying to loosen up government restrictions on public utilities. He has fallen out

with considerable sections of his own faction for his performance in past corporatisation negotiations, as well as for the fact that he was one of the first members of Labor Unity to desert Bob Hawke and agitate for Paul Keating.

Meanwhile, the Victorian Left has, upon attaining its greatest degree of power in decades, succumbed to infighting and division. Personalities have played a big role. Kim Carr, the Socialist Left secretary since the early 1980s, has been a powerful force in building up the Left's influence within the State Government. In the 1982 Cain Cabinet the Left had only two junior ministers. Now it has the Premier and the Treasurer, while the Deputy Premier relies on Left numbers.

But Carr, who will enter the Senate next year, has an assertive personal style which has not endeared him to some leftwingers whose ambitions he and the ruling group have not fostered. Despite her apparent distance from her faction, Joan Kirner has regularly had to rely on her Socialist Left base to keep her government together. This was true of the corporatisation imbroglio. The Trades Hall Council and the party's administrative committee opposed the plan, and the Right and the hard Left threatened to call a special conference to discuss the issue.

Everybody in the party knew that the bitterness would splatter itself all over such a public forum. Thus, Kirner upped the ante and threatened to call a June election. You can take the blame for the Government's destruction, she told her surly comrades. It worked. They backed off, and the Government delayed the reforms for a few months. But it was really only a bit of time-buying, some papering over the cracks.

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