



MARGINS

FRACTIONS OF FACTIONS

Well, life in Victoria under Jeff Kennett is as many believed it would be: always interesting.

He spent his final year as Opposition leader like a car under a tarpaulin. Victorians knew what was under it, they could see its shape, they remembered its lines, but time had made them a bit blurry. Power necessitated that the tarpaulin be cast aside.

Kennett's run-ins with language, accountability, the public service and the media make a good story. But they are likely to obscure an even better story: the appalling plight of the Labor Party in Victoria after its defeat. The decisions the Labor movement will make during the next 12 months will determine whether the Victorian ALP moves back to a chilling repeat of its worst days during the 1960s.

In the weeks following the election there was little to suggest that the party could revive itself, although that is often the case when a government has seen its lower house numbers plummet (in this case from 46 to 26). However, all the ingredients are there for a protracted war of attrition between the four—count them, four—factions in the Victorian ALP Caucus of 40.

There will be no winner in this war, save perhaps for some MPs who—in the style of their 60s predecessors—like the idea of the parliamentarian's salary without the drudgery and heartbreak of winning and exercising power. The problems of the Victorian ALP at the parliamentary level can be traced back to late 1988, when the Socialist Left—at that time operating en bloc—enjoyed a slim caucus majority.

Having, until then, not been part of the parliamentary leadership group in the then six-year-old Cain government, the Left moved on Deputy Premier Robert Fordham whose political reputation was under a cloud as a result of the losses of the Vic-

torian Economic Development Corporation. Joan Kirner replaced Fordham, and the Socialist Left ascendancy had begun.

Mrs Kirner's rise to the premiership in August 1990 aggravated tensions, not only between the centre-right Labor Unity and the Socialist Left, but within those groupings. Labor Unity split informally. There were those, like Labor Minister Neil Pope, who were happy to work with Mrs Kirner. But there were those, like Agriculture Minister Ian Baker and backbencher Bob Sercombe, who were not. On the Left some union officials, such as the Electrical Trades Union's Gary Main, were becoming unhappy with the policy compromises that Mrs Kirner was making. As well, there were Left MPs, such as MLA Neil Cole, and ALP organiser Don Nardella, who were displeased with the influence being wielded by Kirner's former adviser, Socialist Left secretary Kim Carr.

By late 1990 leading members of Labor's Right were holding secret talks with various members of the disgruntled Left-wingers, known as the Pledge group. Their unity ticket (hard Left and non-ideological Labor Right) rolled the mainstream Left in the 1991 preselections.

The result, following the 1992 election, is that the hard Left has eight MPs, only a few less than Labor Unity and the mainstream Left, and is in a supreme bargaining position.

Thus, while Mrs Kirner and the leadership group retained their positions in the post-election caucus ballot, it can be only a temporary situation. Baker wants the leadership, something he signalled to the Labor Right nationally some time ago. Federal rightwing Senator Stephen Loosley, for example, has backed Baker in his column for the Murdoch papers. In-

terestingly, so too has the old patriarch of the hard Left, Bill Hartley, on his Melbourne radio show.

On the eve of that caucus ballot, the hard Left MPs caucused separately, something they had been doing for several months while also attending Left caucus. They decided at that meeting, however, to no longer attend Left caucus, thus formalising their separate-faction status. This was of some significance, because union support for this grouping comes from some individuals who are not ALP members. Len Cooper, an official of the Communications Workers Union, has enjoyed links to the grouping yet he does not belong to the ALP. Cooper, a former Trades Hall Council president, is involved in general Left politics at what was once regarded as the extreme end of the political spectrum.

It is clear now that the broad Labor Left, for all of its organisational strengths, was neither ideologically nor practically prepared for power in Victoria. It is also clear that the Labor Right, wrongfooted by being responsible for many of the state's unfortunate economic policies, is no longer cohesive and lacks an integrated view about its role. The deals between Labor Unity and the Pledge group did achieve their goal of humiliating and weakening the mainstream Socialist Left. But it is hard to see what the instability it has embedded in the affairs of the ALP will actually bring, short of more instability.

What does the ALP in Victoria stand for? The fracturing of the party in the lead-up to, and aftermath of, the 1992 state election suggests that it does stand for something. But it is not something Victorians would ever vote into office. ■

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