



PROFILE

Joan Kirner

Few of us ever actually see real changes in public life. Sure, politics change but we often don't notice until the change has already happened. When Joan Kirner became Victoria's premier in early August, you could see the change, feel it, almost taste it - instantly.

Until Kirner got the nod from her caucus colleagues, Victorian Labor was not just in a slump, or in trouble. It was in the toilet. A Saulwick poll, conducted for *The Age* only a week before John Cain decided to resign, showed Labor's primary vote at 22%, its vote after preferences about 35%.

Clearly, under Cain, Victoria was on the verge of becoming ungovernable. The rhetoric of sound management and dour determination that was Cain's stock-in-trade had degenerated into a shabby joke as Victoria's economy slowed and the state debt rose to \$25 billion. In many respects, however, what did Cain in was the fact that the rhetoric of the Cain era had been discredited. The economic reality is not as bad as many Victorians, eager to feel depressed, believe.

Significantly, Kirner attempted within moments of taking over from Cain to call a new rhetorical war, one in which she is playing the

offensive role. Kirner named the following as her three goals: greater community involvement in government decision-making (what she calls 'community ownership'); the achievement of sustainable development while improving the environment (she was Conservation Minister in 1985-88); and social justice.

In case you haven't worked it out already, Kirner is from the Left of Victorian Labor. Her stated goals are tinged with the aura of 60s-70s tree-hugging: but really, from a political point of view, what choice does she have? For the sake of the



Labor Party, for the sake of Victoria, she has to separate her administration as much as possible from Cain's.

Kirner is 52, a former secondary teacher, married to a teacher, a mother of three grown-up children. Her political involvement grew during the 70s as she became active in parent associations; she served on Whitlam's Schools Commission in the mid-70s. She entered parliament in 1982, a fact which makes her a unique figure in Victorian

politics - no other Labor premier can claim never to have sat on the Opposition benches.

Kirner won preselection for her upper house seat in 1982 with the support of the rightwing Labor Unity faction but soon after recanted and joined the Socialist Left. In 1988, the Left engineered her move to the lower house; the plan was always for her to rise only as far as the deputy premiership, first to Cain and then to an independent, Jim Kennan. But Kennan's leadership chances were blown by the costly transport dispute last January. Ironically, because the Right would not enter into a joint ticket with the Left in the wake of Cain's resignation, Kennan has ended up being Kirner's deputy.

However, ironies and anti-90s political speak notwithstanding, Kirner faces enormous difficulties. It is one thing to convince ministers and union officials of the need for drastic expenditure cuts - Victoria faced a \$1 billion revenue shortfall at the end of the 1989-90 financial year - and to push them through the state budget. It is another to convince Victorians that they will just have to live with reduced services and higher prices for transport, cigarettes, beer, power.

In the final weeks of the Cain government, the unions loomed as the biggest threat. Under the guidance of the Trades Hall Council, they were organising mass resistance to proposed government job losses. But with Kirner's elevation, THC secretary John Halfpenny and the majority Left unions affiliated to the council now have a more direct stake in the government's fate. Kirner's most daunting task is to convince her union comrades that her special style of tree-hugging can be good for them.

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