
BOOK REVIEW

CAVALIER v THE ROUNDHEADS

Power Crisis – The Self Destruction of a State Labor Party by Rodney Cavalier (Cambridge University Press, 2010) ISBN: 9780521138321, pages: 224.

Rodney Cavalier is a rare inhabitant of the Australian body politic. He was a member of the left of the New South Wales Labor Party at a time when to be so was not a prudent career move. He became a Minister of Education in the Wran government and earned the ire of the syndicalist Teachers Federation. The Teachers Federation leadership loathed him because he did not surrender to their sectional demands.

Since leaving politics, he has become a public intellectual and chairman of the Sydney Cricket Ground (SCG). As the author of the ALP Southern Highlands Branch's newsletter, he has been a chronicler of the party's affairs and history. He has perhaps become its conscience, albeit one crying in the wilderness. His new book, *Power Crisis – The Self Destruction of a State Labor Party*, has as its catalyst the fall of the Iemma/Costa government on the issue of privatisation of the State's electricity assets. The leadership's fall came at the behest of the Labor Council's blue collar unions, whose members work in the State-owned generators and distributors of electricity. This successful campaign by the unions against a popularly elected Labor government provides a study into the malaise affecting the ALP, both in New South Wales and nationally.

His description for a cure will aggravate the very forces which brought down the Iemma government. Many of these union leaders were at the launch of his book at the SCG's Members' Stand and clapped politely. Their polite applause may well have been absent had they read the book. The fault that Rodney Cavalier identifies is the very structure of the Labor party. The supreme governing body of the New South Wales ALP is its annual conference. By the party's rules, a fixed majority of delegates are supplied by affiliated unions and the minority of delegates are selected by the geographical branches. This still is the case in the first decade of the 21st century when union membership is in overall decline. The overall decline is particularly noted in the private sector and in those unions which are affiliated to the party. The union dominance over the party's structure affects pre-selection for candidates and the election of full-time party officers. The union leadership reflects only a narrow strand of our modern society. Worse, it is observed that the active membership of the party is probably no more than 1,000 persons. Many of these active members are full-time parliamentarians, their staff, full-time union officials, certain public servants and relatives. Intermarriage is common within the Labor party over generations and also must be affecting the party's gene pool.

This book examines Labor's history and how Iemma, to his detriment, ignored it. The author notes the decline in the left with the ending of the Cold War. The factional system hitherto built on ideology is now generally based on personality and personal preference.

The book's description of the then Treasurer, Michael Costa's speech at the annual conference as "stark raving bonkers" (you can see it on YouTube) recently received a withering riposte. In his December 2010 article in the *Australian Literary Review*, Costa characterised Cavalier's position as being "a Jurassic Park solution to Labor's loss of purpose". He also spoke of Cavalier's "mealy-mouthed socialism". Apart from the exchange of epithets, both Cavalier and Costa agree that there is a deep problem which resides in the disproportionate power or gerrymander held by the union movement. The lack of a motivating ideology has caused a fraying of its once idealistic supporters both from the left and the right. The Greens, as a party, were picking up the pieces of this fracturing of the left. They were electorally successful as well until the Liberals (in Victoria) realised that supporting the doctrinaire Greens was no longer an appropriate strategy. The loss on the right of Catholic voters started with the DLP in the 1950s and continued into the 1990s with the rise of the so-called Howard Battlers.

There is a great deal to ponder and learn from this excellent and timely book. The lessons are not just there for the ALP, but also for the Coalition parties which equally have a declining membership.

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Such small memberships are easily manipulated by focused and determined groups whose views or actions may well be divorced from the core secular values of our liberal society.

Jeffrey Phillips SC