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FROM SOCIALISM TO COMMUNITARIANISM: LINDSAY TANNER
AND THE CRISIS OF THE AUSTRALIAN LEFT AFTER
GLOBALISATION

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From socialism to communitarianism: Lindsay Tanner and the crisis of the Australian left after globalisation

Introduction

The experience of globalisation from the 1980s challenged the certainties of the Australian political left. State socialism collapsed, the tariff wall came down, union membership plunged and populist conservatism won the support of many former Labor voters. Lindsay Tanner played a major role within debates on the Australian left about how to respond to these challenges. He began his political activism as a member of the left of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) left in the late 1970s. During the next decades he served as an office-bearer in the Federated Clerks’ Union (FCU), was a federal Labor parliamentarian from 1993 to 2010 and served as Finance Minister in the governments of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard from 2007 to 2010.

Tanner’s interventions demonstrated a distinct political ethos; a set of practices and attitudes that reflected the experiences of distinct group of voters. From the 1990s he came to speak for many progressives attracted neither by the certainties of the remnant traditional left or limited horizons of contemporary Labor. The record of Gough Whitlam in power and outrage at his dismissal underpinned their loyalty to Labor. They welcomed the shift towards a more diverse and tolerant Australia but worried if Labor’s traditional egalitarian aspirations could survive in a globalised environment. They accepted that Labor should compromise to retain office and farewelled the socialist project but feared that power for modern Labor was an end in itself. They were deeply disturbed by what they saw as John Howard’s successful appeal to values of racism and xenophobia and even more by Labor’s apparent reluctance to challenge his appeal. This milieu provided the audience for Labor’s internal critics such as Tanner himself, Rodney Cavalier, John Button and John Faulkner(Delahunty 2010, pp.33, 45–47; Parke & Robinson 2010; Tanner 2011; Farnsworth 2013). Tanner was distinctive among Australian politicians of the left in his attempt to propose a communitarian critique of neo-liberal culture in Australia.
A labour historian in politics

Tanner began his intellectual activity as a labour historian. His practice had three outcomes; an honours thesis on the ideology of the Australian left from 1917-31, a 1984 Masters thesis on working-class life in Brunswick in the 1920s and a 1982 journal article on Labor in Victorian politics 1880-1903. These works displayed consistent themes: an interest in ideas, a concern with the reality of working-class life, and a determinist approach that regarded political outcomes as the reflection of social and economic change. This methodology would guide his political analysis.

The major intellectual influence on Tanner’s historical practice was the work of E. P. Thompson. Tanner’s 1984 study of the Brunswick working class sought a Thompsonian history from below. He found a class with a strong sense of identity and locality, aware of inequality but acquiescent in the status quo. Tanner argued that the dominance of the middle class was enforced not by cultural hegemony but by economic dependence. His explanation of the slow rise of Victorian Labor, compared to other states, largely focused on economic factors: ‘the dominance of the small manufacturing and entrepreneurial strata of Victorian industry’ (Tanner 1982; Tanner 1984; Tanner 1993a, p.702)

The elegiac focus of Thompson’s work has been criticized, by authors such as Gavin Kitching and Perry Anderson, as a form of utopian ‘romantic anti-capitalism’ that discouraged consideration of feasible current political strategy. For Tanner, to the contrary, the influence of Thompson’s work encouraged political realism. Tanner was aware that the present reality of working-class life in late 20th century Australia was very different from that of the 1920s. Tanner’s knowledge of labour history made him resistant to Labor’s nostalgic evocation of the ‘true believers’. His 1979 thesis provided a critical examination of the early Australian left. He described a movement nominally Marxist but acquiescent in racism, prone to revolutionary rhetoric but opposed to violence, and one whose radical aspirations were underpinned by workers’ defensive anxieties about rationalization and deskilling(Kitching 1983; P. Anderson 1980; Tanner 2012g; Tanner 1979).

Socialism under challenge

As a young socialist Tanner joined an ALP left in transition. During the 1970s the Socialist Left (SL) faction of the Victorian ALP had become a political machine that pursued power within the ALP
rather than the expression of a broader social movement. Non-members of the ALP were excluded from participation in the faction. In the early 1980s, the ALP left was marginalized within the Hawke government whilst the union left was locked in behind the Accord. The traditional assumption of the left had been that Labor’s practice was consistent with democratic socialism even if progress towards a more socialist economy was glacial or nonexistent. By the mid-1980s there were signs that this was no longer the case as neo-liberalism shaped Labor’s economic policies (J. L. Anderson 1980, pp.22–37; Kokocinski 1984, p.29; Tanner 1996c).

In 1985 Tanner made his first sustained political intervention with the widely circulated manuscript ‘The Left in Crisis’. In this paper, he declared a commitment to socialism: ‘the fundamental concern of Australian socialists [is] transformation of the Australian economy from a capitalist to a socialist mode of production’. Tanner argued that the Australian left had been in decline since the late 1940s. In this pessimism, he found common ground with Trotskyists and libertarian Marxists rather than the mainstream union left who were committed to the Accord. To Tanner the decline of socialism was in part due to social change: suburbanization and deindustrialization had weakened the traditional working class. Tanner also argued that the legacy of the 1960s was mixed. He contended that what had proven most enduring were ‘ideals of hedonism and nihilism – such as sexual liberation – rather than socialism’. The left he argued was torn between ‘mindless sloganizing’ and ‘palest social democratic reformism’. He agreed with Trotskyist criticism of the left’s nationalist and protectionist economic policy and its tendency to anticipate another Great Depression as ever imminent (Beilharz 1994, pp.148–178; Tanner 1985, pp.14–16, 20–29).

Tanner did see positive signs. There was far more awareness of international struggles among the Australian left. New social movements such as those of women and migrants now supported left positions, and in this they had been joined by some traditionally conservative organizations such as churches and white-collar unions. The most encouraging development was the prospect of greater left unity. He admitted that attitudes towards the ALP would remain a point of division: ‘Labor governments take decisions which outrage many committed and sincere socialists’ (Tanner 1985, pp.34–36).

The international references in ‘The left in crisis’ were overwhelmingly to Britain. In the next six years the international environment was transformed by the crisis of European communism that
culminated in 1991 with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. One of the dominant interpretations of the fall of Communism was that proposed by the American scholar Francis Fukuyama. He argued that the collapse of Communism had marked the ‘end of history’. Liberal democracy was now the ‘only game in town’. Fukuyama’s conclusions were not as triumphalist as that of many of his admirers. He observed that the end of history had ended the age of struggles and heroism. Fukuyama concluded with some disappointment that politics would now become a purely technical process. In his later works Fukuyama identified important challenges to liberal democracy: the radical individualism of the 1960s that challenged norms of responsibility and obligation together with scientific advances such as genetic engineering that placed in doubt what it meant to be human. In 2002 Tanner told Parliament: ‘I am a fan of Fukuyama’ (Fukuyama 1992, pp.301–312; Tanner 2002a, pp.5514–5516).

The left remade

The economic and social transformations of the late 1980s and early 1990s challenged the intellectual foundations of the old Australian left but in the longer run they advantaged the ‘left’ as a faction within the ALP. Many right-wing unions had relied on industrial arbitration to secure wage rises and employers had often supported such unions to exclude more militant organizations. As industrial relations deregulation took hold unions struggled to resist employer attacks against work conditions and negotiate on the ground for better conditions. Many conservative unions were particularly ill-suited to this task, no more so than the Victorian branch of the Federated Clerks Union (FCU)(Tanner 1996d, pp.22, 82–83).

Tanner was a pioneer critic of the tendency of the left to define the working-class as inherently blue-collar and male. His involvement in the FCU expressed this commitment to an enlarged constituency of left politics. Tanner was a leading figure in the reform group that successfully challenged the FCU leadership. In 1988 he was elected union secretary(Tanner 1996d, pp.59, 100–103; Tanner 2012m, pp.5–6).

The reform group’s victory in the FCU right was a significant victory for the left in Victoria but the new union leadership entered an ALP left in disintegration. Tanner was both a participant in the left and an analyst of its crisis. He argued that the left was divided between traditionalists and modernizers. Lines of division between these camps included the acceptance by federal left
ministers of the framework of the Labor government’s economic policy, the ‘winner-take-all’ style of the ascendant modernizing group in the SL and the implementation by the SL dominated Victorian government of policies of privatization and budgetary restraint. In 1991 a section of left unionists and left traditionalists, the ‘Pledge group’, broke with the SL and formed an alliance with the Labor right. The split in the SL demonstrated that ‘socialism’ no longer functioned as a unifying ideology for the left in the ALP. It was the first manifestation of the union-based sub factionalism that has become endemic within the ALP. Tanner struggled to maintain the unity of the FCU reform group during the battle against the union right. Tanner’s position as a union leader was distinct from that of those former student politicians recruited by established union leaderships in traditionally left blue-collar unions. Secure in their position they, such as Brendan and Michael O’Connor, played intra-left politics with enthusiasm (Boyle 1991; Scott 1999a, pp.192–197; Tanner 1991; Tanner 1996d, pp.186–192; Beacham 2013).

In 1991 Tanner sought Labor endorsement for the federal electorate of Melbourne, then a safe seat for the party and a bulwark of the SL. Tanner won the support of the left traditionalists in a battle with Julia Gillard. The future Prime Minister was backed by some unionists, such as Brendan O’Connor, unhappy with what they saw as Tanner’s conciliation of Pledge supporters within the FCU (Kent 2009, pp.79–85; Tanner 1996d, pp.192–193).

After Paul Keating’s surprise victory in 1993 Tanner entered a Labor caucus that was more harmonious than it had been during the Hawke government. Debates about economic reform were largely over. The focus of the Keating government on issues such as native title, aboriginal reconciliation and the republic were attractive to many Labor MPs. The government’s response to the recession laid out in the Working Nation statement of 1994 was congenial to the left. The late Keating years were an inspiration for Tanner’s later political practice (Carr 1994; Steketee 2001; Tanner et al. 1994).

In the early 1990s, Tanner emerged as a leading commentator on the direction of the ALP. To him Labor’s electoral success concealed a crisis within the party. Labor’s structures and culture were at variance with a changed society. State socialism, he argued, had been unable to adapt to technological change and the passing of the industrial era. Labor activists, whether on the socialist left or labourist right, faced similar challenges. Tanner argued that socialism had in Australia always
been legitimated as ‘an adjunct to labourism’ (Tanner 2012l, pp.23–26; Tanner 2012f, pp.278–280).

He contended that the structures on which ‘traditional ALP faith has been founded – protectionism, conciliation and arbitration, high living standards, and trade union strength – are in the process of being drastically weakened or destroyed by international forces beyond our control’. Tanner argued that this implied a transformation of the structure of the ALP. In a society where traditional class identities were in decline Labor needed to empower individual activists by initiatives such as rank-and-file participation in the selection of parliamentary candidates and party office-bearers (Tanner 1991; Tanner 2012f, p.278; Tanner 2012i, p.285).

Other Labor activists challenged the emphasis that Tanner placed on structural reform of the ALP. Andrew Scott and Stuart Macintyre argued that Labor’s problems reflected the absence of a coherent ideological framework to replace the socialist project. Scott, sympathetic to left traditionalist arguments, contended that Tanner gave excessive attention to middle-class Labor voters’ desertion to the Greens and Democrats rather than the defection of workers to the right (Scott 1990; Macintyre 1991).

In 1996 Labor crashed to a severe defeat at the hands of John Howard’s Liberals in an election marked by the desertion of many working-class voters to the right. The defeat briefly empowered Labor critics of economic liberalism. Tanner largely rejected their case. He did contend that Labor should have given more attention to direct job creation and infrastructure expenditure. Despite this he argued strongly that Labor should reject the ‘populism’ that he saw exemplified by Pauline Hanson (Tanner 1996a; Tanner 1997b; Tanner 1997a; Childs 1997).

Tanner’s rejection of the left traditionalists was shared by new Labor leader Kim Beazley (Lavelle 2005, pp.54–56). With one brief break Tanner was a shadow minister during Labor’s 11 years in opposition. He held shadow portfolios of Transport, Communications and Finance and briefly under Mark Latham ‘Relationships’.

By 1999 Tanner was a leading voice of modernization: he argued that Pauline Hanson and John
Howard both represented the ‘closed’ Australia of the past marked by features such as state regulation, a high level of manufacturing employment, clear gender relations, ethnic homogeneity, paternalism and tariff protection. The future was that of an ‘open Australia’ (the title of his 1999 book). This new order would be characterized by multiculturalism, gender equality, a high technology based economy and an individualistic culture. Tanner contended that globalisation had rendered Keynesian regulation no longer viable. The economic role of government should be facilitative rather than directive: support education and research and networking between firms. A dichotomy between ‘closed’ and ‘open’ societies informed Tanner’s political practice. Opposition to racism was a constant across his career. (L Tanner 1999, pp.9, 13–14, 21–22; Lindsay Tanner 1999a, pp.2488–2489; Tanner 2008).

Left traditionalists opposed Tanner’s equation of economic and social ‘openness’. Andrew Scott argued that it was illegitimate to consider tariff protection analogous to ‘white Australia’. Scott also contended that Tanner downplayed the extent to which the economic restructuring of the 1980s and 1990s was the intended result of government policy rather than an inexorable process(Scott 1999b; Lindsay Tanner 1999b; Holding 1999).

By 2013 it was common for Labor parliamentary leaders to be drawn from the party’s left which would have been inconceivable in the 1980s, but it was a different left from that of the 1980s. In 1985 Tanner had observed white-collar professionals were an increasingly important component of the ALP. He suggested that they were drawn neither to the industrial militancy of the left nor the ‘boys-club’ opportunism of the right. In the long run he argued members of this stratum would find their way to a revamped right. This did not occur instead the left recast itself to appeal to this constituency. Labor government leaders such as Julia Gillard and Anna Bligh came from the left but their approach to government was quite distinct from the left of an earlier era. Tanner was by intellectual conviction a modernizer, estranged from the nostalgic politics of left traditionalists, but he was not attracted to the pragmatism of leaders such as Gillard and Bligh (Robinson 2008; Tanner 1985, pp.18–19; Wallace 2009; Robinson 2012).

Towards a communitarian left

In early 2001 the Howard government seemed destined for electoral defeat, but in November it was reelected with an increased majority. The victory owed much to the government’s response to
the asylum-seeker crisis of the *Tampa* and community fears about national security that flowed from the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York. The government also benefited from the strong growth of the Australian economy.

The events of 2001 shattered both Labor’s confidence in a return to government and the implicit contract that the party had made with many progressives during the Hawke-Keating years. In 1996 Tanner argued that modern Labor could move to the left, as well as the right, as exemplified by Keating’s support of native title. Labor’s decision to vote with the Howard government on legislation directed against the *Tampa* asylum seekers was described by Tanner in 2003 as the ‘most traumatic experience of my political career’ (Tanner 1996a, p.3; Tanner 2012b, p.138).

Labor’s chosen road after 2001 was often to appease popular conservatism represented by John Howard. The political response of many on the left was a legal liberalism that emphasized the individual rights of asylum-seekers and other marginalized groups against a hostile majority. The Greens were the natural repository of these sentiments. Left traditionalists continued to argue that popular racism was a consequence of economic insecurity that resulted from neo-liberal globalisation. Tanner sought an alternative position to both left liberals and traditionalists. He remained supportive of the economic reform project but also reached out to ordinary Australians disenchanted with some of the consequences of modernity. He proposed a communitarian critique of liberal individualism. Here he found common ground with thinkers such as David McKnight and Clive Hamilton (McKnight 2005; Hamilton 2006).

Tanner’s critique of individualism first came to public attention in the 1990s when he broke with the consensus of the left to oppose voluntary euthanasia. He supported the 1996 Commonwealth legislation that overruled the Northern Territory’s legalization of euthanasia. In parliament he challenged left-wing supporters of euthanasia on the grounds of individual choice to consider their opposition to individual employment contracts. In 2003 he interpreted the euthanasia debate as one that pitted those simply concerned with ‘individual rights and freedoms’ against those concerned ‘for the longer-run consequences for all individuals, our relationships with each other, and society as a whole’ (Tanner 2003, p.106; Tanner 2012c, pp.134–135; Tanner 1996b, pp.5916–5917).
For Tanner a focus on relationships implied a critique of the legacy of the sixties. In 2003 he contended that the sixties revolution was produced by ‘powerful forces of individualism and libertarianism, which grew out of structural economic changes during the post-war boom’. It had liberated many from the burdens of conformism and discrimination but it had also led to isolation, alienation and loneliness and the breakdown of norms of social obligation apparent in dramatic increases in crime, gambling, family breakdown, drug abuse, suicide, and teenage delinquency. Tanner argued that the left must admit the negative consequences of the 1960s rather than allow conservatives to monopolize these concerns. His critique paralleled Noel Pearson’s analysis of the consequence of social breakdown within indigenous communities. It also echoed the arguments of many associated with the Melbourne journal *Arena Magazine*. These commentators such as Guy Rundle and Grazyna Zajdow criticized the individualist utilitarianism and libertarianism of much of the left apparent in attitudes to drug use and euthanasia(L Tanner 1999, pp.11, 66–68; Tanner 2012h, p.33; Tanner 2012j, p.73; Rundle 1995; Zajdow 1999; Pearson 2002).

Tanner believed that euthanasia was only one of many challenges to the human condition. He drew on Fukuyama’s work to argue that scientific innovations such as genetic engineering could potentially create a ‘posthuman condition’. Here Tanner argued that religious insights had much to offer in opposition to ‘mindless’ utilitarianism. Tanner’s doubts about the consequences of technology for the human condition were similar to those of theorists associated with *Arena* in particular Geoff Sharp (Tanner 2003, p.106; Tanner 2002a, pp.5514–5516; Tanner 2006b, pp.153–155; Sharp 2007).

At the time, Tanner’s rhetoric was apocalyptic; western societies faced ‘social disintegration’ and were plagued by ‘insufficient social order and security, not an absence of personal rights and freedoms’. The image evoked of a decline in social cohesion and citizenship was selective. Critics argued that he romanticized the past and gave little attention to new online forms of engagement and participation (Tanner 2003, p.34; Vromen 2004; Wark 1999, p.269).

Tanner hoped that ‘we can move beyond entrenched divisions to tackle serious issues like parenting, youth alienation, crime, national identity, technology and family breakdown if relationships are placed at the heart of our thinking’. These were issues that John Howard evoked to justify his own social conservatism. Left communitarians like Tanner may have been excessively
optimistic about their ability to compete on this terrain (Kelly 2009, pp.285–302; Tanner 2003, p.111). Tanner’s engagement with debates around masculinity and in particular the male experience of family breakdown provided an example of the political risks of communitarianism for the left.

In the first years of the new century one focus of community anxiety about social change was the perceived ‘crisis of masculinity’. This crisis was seen as apparent in declining school performance, violence and self-harming behavior on the part of young men. Many on the political right were concerned by what they perceived as the unfair treatment of men by the family law system. Their particular concern was the alleged disproportionate granting of custody over children to women rather than men in cases of relationship breakdown. Some conservatives argued that the rise of single motherhood and the low representation of men among primary teachers deprived boys of positive role models (Smith 2004)

Tanner accepted that there was a crisis of masculinity but disagreed with those who blamed single mothers or female teachers. Consistent with his social determinism he pointed instead to economic changes and a decline in strength of communities and extended families. He contended that the decline in the significance of manual labour in the Australian economy posed a particular challenge for many young men. He argued for a stronger focus on technical education to meet the needs of young men (Tanner 2003, pp.63–65; Tanner 2002b, pp.7577–7580; Tanner 2004c, pp.269–270)

Concern about the family law system and in particular the experience of divorced fathers led a parliamentary committee in 2003 to recommend that there should be a rebuttable presumption of joint custody of children between divorced parents. To Tanner the low level of participation by many divorced men in the lives of their children was an example of how relationships had become weaker. Tanner served on the committee and praised its report as an example of a bipartisan focus on relationships. In 2006 the Howard government legislated with Labor support to establish the presumption of shared custody. Many family law practitioners argued these reforms placed children at risk. In 2011 legislation by a Labor government responded to these concerns and allowed courts to consider broader evidence of family violence when custody awards were made (Tanner 2004a, pp.24501–24503; Tanner 2006a, p.221; Gander 2011; Neilsen 2011)
Tanner’s role in the family law debate revealed an absence in his work. Many of his themes were congruent with feminism; the critique of individualism, an equation of liberalism with libertarianism, concern with the negative consequences of the sixties and a focus on relationships. Despite this he made little reference to feminism, to him it was an aspect of the ‘liberation battles of the sixties and seventies’, which had ‘largely been won’ (Tanner 2003, p.34). Left traditionalists sought to defend an imagined Australian economic community against globalisation. To Tanner this politics of defense implied exclusion but he too sought to defend communities, in his interpretation against excessive individualism. This communitarian appeal, sometimes phrased as small ‘c’ conservatism, may have illiberal consequences. (Dyrenfurth 2014; Edgar 2014). In 2003 Tanner argued that many on the liberal left underestimated the importance of public fears of crime. It was important that punishment should be seen as a full retribution for criminal actions to enable closure on the part of victims(Tanner 2003, pp.43–48).

Mark Latham secured the Labor leadership in November 2003. There seemed a congruence of interests and concerns between him and Latham. In February 2004 Tanner declared that Latham had put hearts rather than pocketbooks at the centre of politics. In fact there were significant differences in their approaches, both were supportive of economic liberalisation, but Tanner retained doubts about its social consequences, whereas to Latham the solution to contemporary social pathologies lay in voluntaristic ‘community building’. Latham was derisive of Tanner’s argument that Labor’s taxation policy should favour lower-paid workers and his concern with the impact of competition in the retail sector on workers’ conditions. At the October 2004 federal election voters put their hearts in their pocketbooks and returned the Howard government with an increased majority (Latham 2005, pp.241–242, 244, 281; Tanner 2004b, pp.25320–25322).

Reclaiming economic rationalism

The 2004 election defeat plunged Labor into despair. In January 2005 Kim Beazley returned to the party leadership and appointed Tanner spokesperson for Finance. In this position Tanner developed a critique of the Howard government that reflected in part the post-materialist scepticism of affluence but which also addressed Labor’s lack of economic credibility. Tanner’s focus on relationships had sought to creatively engage with community fears that some on the left simply dismissed as inherently conservative and now he applied a similar approach to fiscal policy(Tanner
Tanner accused the Howard government of having abandoned fiscal rigour for political opportunism. This critique struck a chord with some voters. Public opinion between 2004 and 2007 became more skeptical of the Howard government’s financial credentials. It was an aspect of a broader case effectively prosecuted by Kevin Rudd as Labor leader from December 2006 that cast the Howard government as politically clever but short term in focus. It was a critique that also appealed to policy-makers past and present and commentators, even some on the free-market right, disenchanted with Howard’s populism. Tanner became a favourite of ‘serious’ journalists (Tanner 2005, p.114; McAllister & Pietsch 2011, p.23; Henry 2007; Bornstein 2013).

In 2007 Labor swept back to office under Kevin Rudd. Tanner served as Minister for Finance & Deregulation in the new government. He was a member of the ‘gang of four’: an informal group of himself, Rudd, Gillard, and Wayne Swan that drove the government’s economic policy. Despite his centrality Tanner felt increasingly estranged from Labor in government during its first term.

The onset of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) transformed the economic environment that Labor faced. The government’s early advocacy of economic conservatism was replaced by an aggressive response to the crisis. Kevin Rudd condemned the legacy of neo-liberalism. Tanner was more cautious. He eschewed general critique in favour of an emphasis on problems such as global fiscal imbalances; breakdowns in trust and the need to take into account the insights of behavioural economics. He remained a strong defender of the economic reforms of the Hawke-Keating era. Tanner admitted that although the GFC required a new consideration of economic regulation in some areas there could be no return to the regulatory patterns of the past which had been rendered obsolete by ‘structural change’ and which empowered producers at the expense of consumers (Rudd 2010; Tanner 2009; Tanner 2013, pp.49–50)

According to two sympathetic journalists: ‘Tanner was the lone voice arguing for caution about the amount being spent’ during the development of the Rudd government’s stimulus packages. In particular they claimed that he was unenthusiastic about aspects of the government’s car industry support scheme (Taylor & Uren 2010, pp.110, 147; Tanner 2012d, p.344).
By 2007 Tanner’s own electorate of Melbourne was the frontline of Labor’s battle with the Greens. Tanner had been the first Labor figure to identify the potential challenge that Labor faced from the left. In 1990 he had identified ‘Labor’s traditional arrogance towards non-Labor forces on the left of the spectrum, and its unspoken assumption of a divine right to rule at least half of this spectrum’. The reality of the Green challenge met a more hostile response. In 2010 Tanner claimed that the Greens detached Labor’s most progressive supporters but disregarded the need to construct an electoral majority (Tanner 2012f, p.279; Tanner 2012k, pp.324–325). This critique reflected Tanner’s emotional loyalty to Labor and his ideological distance from those Greens sympathetic to left traditionalist values but Tanner’s own politics and style seemed closer to post-materialists such as Clive Hamilton or David McKnight than the contemporary ALP.

On 24 June 2010 Julia Gillard replaced Kevin Rudd as Prime Minister. Tanner was excluded from the maneuvering that led to Rudd’s downfall. On the same day Tanner announced that he would retire from politics at the 2010 election. He remained Minister for Finance up until the 21 August election at which his electorate was won by the Greens (Tanner 2010).

**Labor in crisis**

After a poor performance at the 2010 election Labor was forced into a minority government dependent on the Greens and sympathetic independents. The Gillard government enacted a substantial legislative agenda but was deeply unpopular throughout its term. At the state level Labor endured several crushing defeats. The return of Rudd to the Lodge in June 2013 did not prevent a defeat of Labor at the September election. Labor’s difficulties encouraged a revived debate about the party’s prospects. Tanner contributed to this debate but his approach was divergent from the position he had taken during the first great Labor reform debate of the early 1990s. At that time he emphasized the importance of structural reforms to the ALP and this position had been criticized by those such as Macintyre and Scott to whom Labor’s crisis reflected its absence of a distinctive program for government.

After 2010 Tanner now emphasized program over structure. He argued that social democratic parties worldwide were in search of a new organizing principle. It was true, he admitted, that such
parties could still win elections but he argued that they had ‘largely lost any sense of a broader intellectual narrative’. Tanner himself was vague on what this alternative might be; his 2009 declaration that left politics was now about ‘trust’ evoked little interest. He instead espoused a broader critique of the political system as whole(Kelly 2012; Tanner 2012e; Bornstein 2013).

In 2011 Tanner’s Sideshow was released; a critique of the contemporary trivialization of politics and of the mutual responsibility of politicians and the media for this state of affairs. This book revealed a raft of centre-left policy positions that recalled the late Keating years: Tanner supported forest protection but doubted the proliferation of energy efficiency programs. He complained of the cult of sentimentality and emotion in contemporary politics but deplored the concealment of the horrors of war by euphemisms such as ‘regime change’. Government subsidies to private businesses, even those politically congenial to the left, were questionable. Farm support programs benefited unfairly from media mythmaking about rural life. Media complaints about interest rates ignored the importance of banking system stability(Tanner 2013, pp.54, 56, 66, 87, 98, 115).

Tanner had been critical of Labor’s propensity to recall past glories irrelevant to contemporary voters but now evoked his own golden age. The mid-1980s to late 1990s he argued had been a time of serious debate about policy but the defeat of Jeff Kennett in 1999 had marked the transition from the ‘age of rationalism’ to the ‘age of populism’. It was a judgment different from his early 1990s critique of Kennett in power. Tanner’s themes echoed the arguments of centrists such as Ross Garnaut and the new ‘non-partisan’ think-tank such as the Grattan Institute. In 2013 Tanner became chair of the advisory board for a new health and education think tank based at Victoria University. Radical critics argued that Tanner’s nostalgia for the ‘age of reform’ romanticised an era when policy consensus between Labor and the Coalition on the topic of economic liberalisation undermined democracy(Tanner 2012a; The Piping Shrike 2011; Garnaut 2013; Tanner 1993c, p.767; Victoria University 2013).

**Conclusion: the last romantic?**

Unlike many members of the ALP left Tanner did not respond to the demise of socialist hopes by a simple reconciliation with the status quo as forged by the 1983-96 Labor governments. Like Fukuyama he accepted the triumph of liberal capitalism but was ambivalent about the society that it created. Along with Paul Keating he was the Labor politician most committed to globalisation but
he feared the impact of individualism. Like Jim Cairns, whose legacy he defended, Tanner retained a romantic commitment to politics as critique rather than simply administration (Tanner 1993b, pp.21344–21345). He reached out to divergent forces not necessarily identified with the left but disenchanted with the reality of the present: separated fathers, victims of crime, religious believers and even economic liberals.
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