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Joan Kirner was a woman of many firsts. More than anything, the political career of Kirner – who died on Monday aged 76 – reveals much about the development of the contemporary Australian Left.

As Victorian premier between 1990 and 1992, Kirner was the first member of the modern ALP Left to lead a government.

**A child of Whitlam**
Kirner was a product of the Whitlam generation. A schoolteacher and state school parents’ activist, she represented the sector on the Whitlam government’s Schools Commission. Like so many of her generation, she joined the ALP in response to Whitlam’s 1975 dismissal.

As a politician, Kirner strove to implement the radical hopes of the 1970s in the more conservative 1980s. Kirner joined the Socialist Left faction of the Victorian ALP. In 1982, she became a Labor MP as John Cain brought Labor back into office in Victoria after 27 years in the wilderness.

In 1983, Kirner suggested that governments pursue a four-to-one ratio in incomes, a wealth tax and the extension of collective ownership. While her career as politician would see the Left adopt a more modest approach, she remained committed to her 1983 belief that all humans should have an “equal chance of happiness”.

Within the ALP Left, Kirner was identified with those who argued that the Left could not be a force of opposition but had a responsibility to hold power. After politics, she co-authored the Women’s Power Handbook. This debate has been replayed in the Greens between those keen on the pursuit of ministerial office such as Tasmanian MP Nick McKim and those such as Lee Rhiannon, who are more doubtful.

**Early political career**

In 1985, Kirner was appointed lands and conservation minister. She pioneered Landcare, in co-operation with the traditionally conservative Victorian Farmers’ Federation. This style reflected a broader consultative approach to issues such as logging and alpine grazing.

The government strove to integrate environmental policy with all aspects of government decision-making. It did not see it as a politically expedient add-on – an approach to which later Labor governments were susceptible.

In 1988, Kirner became education minister. This was her lifetime aspiration and she was one of the most pro-active education ministers in Australian history. But here her aspirations for consensus proved harder to implement.

In 1983, Kirner had declared that to put choice at the centre of the education debate was to succumb to a ruling-class agenda. She contended that the task of education policy was to promote equality and empowerment. She agreed with radical sociologist Raewyn Connell that education and liberation were the same task.

The symbol of these commitments from Kirner’s time as minister was the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE). It sought to shift the focus of assessment from external exams, tailored to the university sector, to a greater emphasis on school-based assessment and student projects. Australian Studies, focused on social relations and work culture, was to be compulsory.

The VCE’s aspirations collided with the power of the educational establishment, from universities to...
traditionalist teachers and parents concerned about “standards” and opportunities for their children in a changing economy. Future Labor governments retained Kirner’s commitment to mass participation but were more modest in their egalitarian aspirations.

Rise to the top

Kirner’s ascension to the Victorian premiership in August 1990 was a sign that the Left was now the dominant force in the Victorian ALP. However, the Left’s organisational rise was accompanied by an intellectual retreat.

Collective ownership was discredited by communism’s collapse. The Communist Party – once the Left’s “ideas factory” – was in its last days. The financial problems of the publicly owned Victorian Economic Development Corporation and the State Bank of Victoria had discredited the mildly interventionist economics polices of the Labor government.

The recession of the early 1990s hit Victoria especially hard. The Victorian government’s efforts to reduce the budget deficit sparked bitter conflicts with unions. Labor’s scramble for revenue led it to support the introduction of poker machines, which has had serious long-term equality consequences.

In August 1990, the crippled State Bank was sold to the Commonwealth Bank. The cost of the purchase was covered by partial privatisation of the Commonwealth Bank.

The deal was a breakthrough for advocates of privatisation within the federal government. It also undercut the ALP Left’s opposition to privatisation – it was a Left-led government that acquiesced in the process. The State Bank also contributed to a major split in the Left that ended its domination of the party.

Kirner and her factional colleagues looked to Canberra and to their former “economic rationalist” nemesis, Paul Keating. They welcomed his ascension to the prime ministership in October 1991 and his more assertive response to the economic recession.

Keating and Kirner seemed unlikely allies but their partnership anticipated the direction most of the Left, whether ALP or Green in hue, would take: a recognition that socialism’s time was past, but that the state should take an active role in the promotion of social equity and the reconfiguration of social relations around equity and modernity.

Kirner returned to community politics after Labor’s 1992 defeat. EMILY’s List, which she convened, supported the involvement of women in Labor politics. Her career illustrated the story of the Australian Left from Whitlam to the present.