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Review: Faction Man – Bill Shorten’s Path to Power

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What do we learn about Labor leader Bill Shorten from David Marr’s new Quarterly Essay?

David Marr’s Quarterly Essay on Opposition Leader Bill Shorten – entitled *Faction Man* – has come out at just the right time. Malcolm Turnbull’s recent ascension to the prime ministership has sharpened the focus on Shorten.

Marr struggles to get to grips with his subject. In part this reflects Shorten’s own ordinariness, but it is also because of Marr’s position as a sceptical Sydney intellectual.

Faction Man is a product of Black Inc, the incarnation of high-minded Victorian left liberalism. Its patron saint is Robert Manne. From their perspective, Shorten – and his fascination with grimy Labor

machine politics – is an alien figure.

What do we learn about Shorten?

Shorten's personal story is a familiar one of a strong mother and an absent father. Also significant is the simple fact that Shorten never doubted his allegiance to the Labor Party. In this he reflects many Australians. A substantial portion still regard themselves as "rusty on" Labor voters.

This inertia contrasts with the milieu of the Quarterly Essay "brand". Manne went from right to left. Left intellectuals once agonised over Labor and the Greens before siding firmly with the latter. Even Shorten's left-wing rivals in the Monash ALP club fretted over the Hawke-Keating Labor Party before nerving themselves to make a final commitment.

Shorten is unencumbered by doubt, whereas the certainty of Kevin Rudd and Tony Abbott obscured a private uncertainty. Thus, Shorten is a "people person", unlike most intellectuals. He is undaunted by knockbacks and disappointments.

Shorten is, Marr notes, the master of the small room and inherited his father's knockabout skills. Often those skilled in one-on-one politics struggle to appeal outside a small group environment. Julia Gillard exemplified this, while Rudd appealed to the masses. Shorten faces the dilemma of balancing both.

The downside for Shorten in Marr's description of his political faith is the absence of any intellectual basis. This is perhaps unfair. Marr has clearly interviewed many people and sifted through trade union royal commission testimony, but he has not examined Shorten's parliamentary speeches.

Marr is not a historian of ideas. It is true, however, that Shorten's political philosophy has never been expressed with the coherence of Rudd's musings on social democracy or even Gillard's clunky neolabourism.

The only significant intellectual figure that Marr identifies for Shorten is a high-school history teacher. In conversation, Shorten evokes lessons of military strategy rather than political philosophy. Progressives despair at this lack of curiosity, but it also insulates Shorten from the clunky exercises in "social conservatism" of some of his party colleagues.

Shorten's critics evoke the mystifying concept of authenticity, but all politicians are strategic.

Shorten, Labor and the unions

Marr treks with bemusement through the intricacies of union politics but rather misses the key issues. Shorten represents the modernising Victorian Labor right, whose approach was pioneered by future ACTU leader Bill Kelty's Storemen and Packers in the 1970s. Shorten reshaped the moribund Australian Workers Union in this image.

Despite all the wheeling and dealing and personal battles within the Victorian right that Marr lovingly describes, the faction has, in the end, re-unified, as it expresses a coherent political project. The NSW Labor right remained trapped in a Cold War hostility to the left and a faith in the industrial arbitration system with its strategic implication of a hostility to strike activity. All of these bulwarks collapsed in the 1980s and 1990s.

The NSW right has since become so disorientated that it has had to recruit parliamentary leaders from the party's left. Victoria's modernising Labor right knew how to use union militancy in a globalised and deregulated economy. Yet this has costs – in the US, unions have increasingly become dependent on the support of sympathetic governments and employers.

The wheeling and dealing with employers that Marr discusses at length is a product of this. It has preserved a niche for unionism when many anticipated its collapse, but it also offers little prospect of an upsurge of union membership.

Shorten is comfortable with history. It is no coincidence that the intellectual he is closest to is Labor historian Nick Dyrenfurth. In a speech to launch Dyrenfurth's *Mateship*, Shorten evoked the ideal of a modern non-racial mateship of inclusion and fairness.

Abbott, in the words of William F. Buckley, too often aspired to stand aside history, yelling "stop". Labor had an easy task against him, but in Turnbull it faces a leader comfortable with progress.

The history of Australia is not just the tale of mateship Shorten absorbed in high school history but a story of capital and power in the world's first globalised state. In 1984, the ANU's Kosmos Tsokhas noted that:

... those concerned with the introduction of radical reforms in Australia ... [would] come against ... [a] stubborn yet flexible system of power.

In the past 30 years that structure has developed remarkably. And Shorten, along with Marr, has little idea of how to make an effective challenge to it.