

Meet warlords and pirates who run the NSW ALP

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BETRAYAL

Simon Benson

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The NSW ALP is a grotesque shambles. Like Somalia, it is a failed state run by warlords and pirates. With such disarray to document, Simon Benson must have enjoyed writing his account of the government's recent travails and he has indeed produced a rollicking read. *Betrayal: The Underbelly of Australian Labor* centres on the failed attempt by the Premier, Morris Iemma, and the Treasurer, Michael Costa, to privatise the electricity industry and their conflict with the trade union movement at the ALP's 2008 annual conference.

The charismatic and idiosyncratic treasurer is the star of the book and his escapades make entertaining reading. Costa entered the NSW parliament's upper house in 2001 courtesy of the strength of the bloc votes of the right-wing unions that control the party. Iemma had arrived a decade earlier and one of Benson's most telling observations is that the future premier first came to prominence because of his enthusiastic stacking and manipulation of union delegations at Young Labor conferences.

The 2008 electricity crisis was to end their political careers. Fundamentally, it was about who, when push really comes to shove, controls the ALP. The outcome confirmed that the conference is the party's supreme policy and organisational body. This should have been no surprise to either Costa or Iemma or their backers - the former premiers Barrie Unsworth and Bob Carr and the former prime minister Paul Keating. After all, for decades the conference is where political power has been generated and distributed.

What was remarkable was that the challenge came from the very people who had built their political careers courtesy of the power of the conference that they then sought to defy. For Costa, it was an audacious and astonishing case of biting the hand that feeds. For Iemma, it proved that he had lost his early flair for manipulating union delegates.

The problem that Iemma and Costa faced is that the conference has gone unreformed for years. Its composition is unrepresentative, its structure rorted: cronyism, patronage and nepotism are rampant. As Benson makes clear, the fundamental distortion is that while the affiliated unions represent less than 12 per cent of the workforce, they control 50 per cent of the conference votes. The unions' voting strength inside the ALP is out of all proportion to their role in the wider community. It was a deformity that was to cost Iemma and Costa dearly.

As Benson does the analysis, it is noteworthy how silent the key players are on this point. Keating speaks with pride about his record of reforming Australia's economy and social institutions. Carr was a brilliant election winner and increased the ALP's primary vote in four successive elections. But he, Keating, Iemma and Costa are conspicuously silent on the need to reform the ALP.

One explanation is hard to resist. Such a change would mean the quick end of the much-vaunted NSW Right that provided all these men with parliamentary careers and pensions. The NSW Right persists only because of the union bloc vote: it has no other basis. Keating and company will therefore never countenance anything that threatens this. Having climbed the ladder of career opportunity that the unions' bloc votes provide, they do not seek to reform it.

An outcome of this failure is that the ALP's tribal culture of mates and nepotism is increasingly out of place in the modern Australian meritocracy. Educated, skilled and resourceful Australians, who build their careers on the basis of their talents, efforts and performance, look on aghast because they have nothing in common with Labor's anachronistic culture of patronage.

Benson records the consequences of Labor's failure as being a clash of personalities, with Costa's crazed tactics and incendiary language always at the centre of any exchange. Keating and Unsworth are left nodding gravely that things were different in their day. Which is not altogether true. Keating and Unsworth may now wish it were otherwise but when they were running the show, problems were running riot. From the bashing of Peter Baldwin, to the murderer Phuong Ngo, to the sordid scandals in Wollongong, the culture and history of the NSW Right speak for themselves.

Benson's book does show evidence of being hastily completed, with poor editing, irritating typographical errors and a woeful index. There are also some serious factual mistakes, such as the claim that former minister Rodney Cavalier boasted at the Left's annual dinner that the Left had taken over NSW. In truth,

Cavalier has not attended the dinner for 20 years, although his presence, like Banquo's ghost, is discernible to those with the wit to look.

Even so, Benson has done a sound job in delivering a readable and accessible account of the dysfunctional, damaged and cynical culture of the NSW ALP.

Michael Samaras attended the ALP's 2008 conference as a delegate from the MEAA.

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