The “Big Man” in politics: a case study of Kennett’s neo-liberal Victoria

Introduction

In anthropology the Big Man is the leader who ‘stands at the centre of a complex of economic and political structures’ (Lindstrom 2002: 65). Marshal Sahlin’s 1963 definition of the Big Man, captures, better than most, the complex dynamic of a leader who is not the chief (the distinguished statesman of the community) but the political operator who is driven by ideology over community welfare. Shalins (1963 quoted in Lindstrom 2002) describes the Big Man, as ‘reminiscent of the free-enterprising rugged individual of our own heritage. He combines with (sic) an ostensible interest in the general welfare a more profound measure of self-interested cunning and economic calculation’ (65 emphasis added). The notion here is that while the chief is beneficent, the Big Man is a power seeker who, for the sake of political ambition and through economic generosity to his kin and then select members of the tribe, accrues power to distribute the wealth of the tribe as he sees fit.

This paper intends to make use of the symbolism of the Big Man as a guide to the political machinations that occurred during the 7 years of the Kennett government in Victoria (1992 – 1999). Since the Kennett years and possibly because of them the notion of the “conviction politician” gained popular currency and acceptance as a descriptor of a type of political character that believed in political change motivated by ideology. This in itself may have been a response to the pragmatism of the Hawke/Keating governments. But as a political category for Jeff Kennett, conviction politician fails to capture the fundamentalist zeal, and arrogance (see below), that Kennett bought to his premiership. As such the symbolism of the “jungle”, as Peck & Tickell (1994)
mobilised in the 1990s analysis of neo-liberalism, renders the use of the Big Man parallel a useful contextualising device.

The Methodology
A number of semi-structured interviews were conducted with some of the key participants from across Victoria’s political economy. These were then analysed using the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework. The founder of CDA Norman Fairclough (1993) asserts that ‘[d]iscourse is a practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning’ (1993, p. 64). This affords the opportunity to bring political rhetoric and interview material, taken from the political (and other) world/s, from the discursive to the concrete.

Jeff Kennett: Victoria’s “Big Man”
Jeff Kennett’s reputation was as a direct, divisive and determined politician. His hallmark was as a self-styled maverick: “I represent risk,” (Kennett quoted in Parkinson 2000: 56) he proudly proclaimed to his biographer.

... I don’t believe you achieve anything in life without running risk...those things...described as gaffes, most of them were delivered with a lot of consideration...in most cases they were risks I was taking that didn’t come off (66).

Kennett was not engaged philosophically with “big” ideas, “big” government or the corporatist process of consultation and dialogue whether they came from the labour, management or government sides. But ironically he always was a self-styled “big man” who did not easily tolerate dissent. Such was his impact and affect upon the electorate in his first term that the epithet, “crash through or crash”, was linguistically dignified with the media “re-branding” him as a “can-do” Premier who created a “can-do culture” in Victoria¹ (Parkinson 2000: 193).

¹ There were also more negative characterisations, most famously the term “Jeffed” entered the language as an idiom indicating that one was being “done over”.

2
The neo-liberal antecedents in modern Australia

In Australia’s case the shift to neo-liberalism was slow and tentative (Megalogenis 2006) but began on the cusp of the 1970s fiscal crisis (see O’Connor 1973). While there is no doubt that there were earlier breaks from the 20th century Keynesian heritage and moves towards economic (neo)-liberalisation embodied in: the Hawke and Keating governments’ privatisation policies, the floating of the Australian dollar and the “freeing” up of the Australian financial system; the Greiner government’s managerialist approach; and the Cain/Kirner governments’ reluctant moves towards liberalisation, none of these governments approached their task with the speed, belligerent zeal and ideological certainty that government should remove itself as much as possible from the economy and allow the individual (corporation or citizen) to rise in response as the Kennett government did.

The Kennett government’s election came at a time when there was already established pressure for governments to hand over greater responsibilities for the management of the economy through the auspices of self regulation rather than government regulation. This was a direct and calculated challenge to the precepts of the Keynesian approach. Matthew Guy, the current Minister for Planning in the Victorian State Liberal Government in an interview with this author describes the shift (referred to above) in the Victorian State Liberal Party in this way:

I think it’s just, a fundamental belief [which] comes back to ideology, a fundamental belief of (sic) smaller government, individualism empowering people to have more control over their own life, getting the government out of the way of business, if you like. It comes down to capturing Liberal philosophy or the Liberal Party of Australia’s philosophy at its rawest if you like, you know just going back to the, if you like, it sounds corny, the spirit of the individual, you know, where the person has the right to get a government out of the way
and government more as a guiding factor rather than the, implementing factor in decisions in terms of our economic policy (Guy 2001: 2 – 3 emphasis added).

Here Guy (2001) is describing the shift from Keynesianism to neo-liberalism in its “rawest” form. Asserting the rights of both the individual and business to expect that government should determinedly withdraw from the economic world and steer rather than row.

The Political Mobilisation of Crisis

The Kennett Liberal Party used, what appeared to be in retrospect, a Trojan horse technique that was pioneered by Milton Freidman and the Chicago University economics department in Chile in the 1970s (Klein 2007) to establish free market neo-liberalism; that technique was the identification and prosecution of the notion of an economic crisis bordering on catastrophe.

This was the ubiquitous “crisis” that Klein (2007) wrote about in the Shock Doctrine. This economic confluence of events allowed for an opportunity to undertake an extensive political transformation of the economic organisation of state. This climate of crisis eventually allowed the Kennett Government an agenda breadth that could only have been wished for by other political parties coming to power.

This climate of crisis had dual advantages for the Kennett Opposition, prior to their election in 1992: it meant that the electorate was more amenable to change despite Kennett’s chequered political history (Parkinson 2000); and that the “crisis” scenario (Klein 2007) could be mobilised in the service of an neo-liberal economic revolution (Costar & Economou 1999).

Kennett consolidation this notion of crisis when he came to power and promptly ramped it up to the level of disaster. In a statement to the media the newly elected Premier made it clear that the apparent crisis was going to be dealt with as a disaster:
We are not dealing with something which can be solved in a year. This is something that is going to take us forever. Forever ... [The government] is trying to keep increases [in taxes and charges] down to a minimum ... But the Board of Works situation; super; they’re all absolutely RS...This super thing is bigger than Ben Hur - it is huge, its massive...[The public] are owed the facts and by hell they’re going to get ‘em. (Kennett quoted in Hayward 1999, p. 135 emphasis added)

This discourse was essential as a justification for the extremity of their hitherto undeclared policy agenda. As Mr. Kennett explained in Parkinson’s biography: ‘We had made the intellectual decision on how we would proceed well before the election’ (2000, p. 139 emphasis added).

**Neo-liberalism**

The essential features of neo-liberal political economics, according to Peck & Tickell (1994) are:

- the progressive withdrawal of government from direct service provision;
- the sale (privatisation), contracting out or corporatisation of government-provided services;
- a demand on and by governments for on-going budget surpluses;
- the institutionalisation of efficiency and flexibility as the dominant measure of success for both the public and private sectors;
the extensive use of contracts to mediate relationships in the political economy - between consumers and service providers, for employment, and for the provision of services;

the managed shrinkage of the welfare state;

broad advocacy for the virtues of competition and market mechanisms over co-operation;

the marginalisation of Fordist components of the political economy such as government support for union activities, limited and regulated gambling opportunities and a preference for the private provision of education and health care: where this is not possible competitive pressures and corporate disciplines should be introduced to “enhance” service delivery;

an emphasis on the immutability of global economic forces - in particular stock markets, shareholders and credit ratings agencies; and the resultant withdrawal of a will to enforce a regulatory regime to oversee these market activities;

the rise of service industries such as finance, gambling and tourism;

the expectation that all sectors of the political economy will engage in entrepreneurialism and define themselves through a business paradigm; and

a reliance on supply-side instruments (Peck & Tickell 1994 emphasis added).

The “Big Man” disrupts the process
It is an important element in managing political change that the citizens, the social institutions, the bureaucracy, business and the unions be drawn together in broad agreement about the direction and extent of change to allow that change to embed. In Victoria’s political economy the Premier is ideally suited to fulfil this function; a function that requires deft negotiating skills and a willingness to facilitate rather than control. It is incumbent upon this figure to make sure that all players are bought along in the process rather than creating winners and losers. In relation to Victoria’s privatisation process there was little doubt that business was a winner and the public were the losers.

‘Well there’s no question that there’s still a strong belief in the community that the community didn’t get the benefits of privatisation…the business community did get the benefits of it. It got them and it knows it got them’ (Edwards2 2001: 10 interviewee’s emphasis).

In interviews with this author both John Cain (2001: 2) former Labor Premier of Victoria and Sir Rupert Hamer (2001: 10 & 11) former Liberal Premier of Victoria also made references to the private sector inappropriately profiting from the sale of public assets and also made criticisms of the social justice aspects that were being neglected.

Criticism was also being directed by Liberal Party backbenchers as well who identified the resistance to transparency as, not only a key factor in citizen and institution alienation, but also saw it as challenging the fundamental Liberal approach to governance. Victor Perton (2001) made many appeals to Kennett in the party room causing a deal of conflict with Kennett:

Where the conflict became most apparent to me was in areas like freedom of information. Yeah, people like me were saying well you know a Liberal Government, a Liberal state government, should be transparent. You know, if we want

---

2 David Edwards was the head of the Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry during Kennett’s Premierships.
free market economics, you know, we need free movement of information...commercial-in-confidence seemed to be a way around [that] (3 – 4 interviewee’s emphasis).

In one of the defining disruptive moments of the 1999 election campaign, Kennett, when being questioned by an Australian Broadcasting Corporation journalist in an interview for local radio in Melbourne, simply refused to answer any question in reference to his government’s breach of protocol that saw a $24 million tender “given” without a competitive process to a company associated with the daughter of one of his ministers. This line of questioning was pursued purposefully by the interviewer, to which Kennett replied:

Kennett: “You go on, I’ll just sit here and drink my tea”
Faine: “And that’s your only response?”

Here was a demonstration of the arrogance (and contempt that a number of interviewees noted) (see Scales 2001: 5; Hamer 2001: 8 – 9; Cain 2001: 9 and Edwards 2001: 9) that Kennett held for accountability and cultural, political and business norms and values. As dry admirer John Hyde (2002) observed: ‘He, however, had two character flaws not usually associated with an open mind; arrogance and impetuousness’ (343). John Hyde continued:

Kennett was high-handed and therefore picked too many fights, clashing with the Auditor-General, the Director of Public Prosecutions, the Racing Commission and the Equal Opportunity Commissioner. In each case he tried to restructure the relevant offices. It is alleged, probably correctly, that in each case he reduced the independence of senior officers that had been critical of him or his policies. Both the Equal Opportunity Commissioner and the Director of Public Prosecutions resigned (2002: 344 – 345).
This challenged the historical culture that had been built up in Victoria since the time of Alfred Deakin. What it also did was send a message to the potential constituents of the state who ultimately needed to support this transformation that the government was not interested in being accountable to the people and the institutions of the state; and that business and cronies were their preferred constituents to protect.

There was an emerging awareness that the neo-liberalisation process in Victoria was evolving beyond the government preference for “steering rather than rowing” and was developing towards a synthetic corporation with the values of business and the guidance of the market being the essential precepts upon which good governance was measured.

The serious flaws that were emerging in this evolution of governance practices in the Kennett era and the potential damage and resistance that it was causing to the establishment of support for the neo-liberal regime of accumulation were evident in the ideological breadth of the ensemble of Victorian organisations that were resisting the Kennett version of neo-liberal governance. There were also concerns about the message that that was sending to the community in relation to a neo-liberal regime of accumulation. The discursive and cultural practices that were being produced by the Kennett government, and the Premier himself, were creating a new social order to which a wider and more diverse range of groups were becoming resistant.

What in the first term was A Popular Government with Unpopular Policies (Lavelle 2000) was becoming an unpopular Premier with unpopular policies and an unpopular accumulation practice. A senior minister in the Kennett Government who was interviewed for this paper, but wished not to be identified, described Kennett’s demeanour and approach: ‘he was imbued with the roar he was making at the centrepiece of his own processes’ (Interviewee B 2001).

Blame for the dramatic and unexpected loss of the 1999 election by the Kennett Government was explicitly laid at the feet of Premier Kennett based on specific character flaws explored herein. (Scales 2001: 5; Hamer 2001: 8 –
9; Cain 2001: 9; Edwards 2001: 9; and Clark 1999). Analysis of the electoral rejection only implicitly challenged the neo-liberal revolution (Costar & Economou 1999). Instead it focussed upon the citizens’ response to Kennett’s management of the shift to neo-liberalism:

Liberal insiders explained it as ‘reform fatigue’ described here by Phil Gude (2001: 13) the Deputy Liberal leader in the first two governing periods:

There was a desire to continue the reform agenda on the party’s part but the community had become weary of change and they were like somebody drowning and they wanted to get their head up and have a real good gasp, they actually wanted to get out of the water and lie there for a while and get their breath back and they weren’t being given that opportunity…we were about to effectively embark on a whole new new agenda (interviewee’s emphasis; see also O’Reilly 2000: 19).

The Age’s economic affairs writer Tim Colebatch identified two key approaches of the Kennett government that alienated both citizens and institutions that resonated with the neo-liberal agenda. Colebatch (1999) describes a quasi-business culture that has shifted public service culture that used to responded on the basis of “rights” to one that valorises “opportunities”; and that the “revolution” that Kennett lead was a global one focussed on smaller government which necessarily eschewed community partnerships.

The rejection of the Kennett government and its central role in the process of neo-liberalising the Victorian public service, government and economy was subsumed in the analysis built around the superstructure of the Big Man-leader (Little 1999: 23 – 24 and Alomes 1999: 19) falling. Media analysis focussed primarily on the shock of his loss rather than ‘the destructive and fragmenting impacts of [his] neoliberal policies’ (Broomhill 2001: 136). The
obvious issue that this brings up for critical analysis is the agentic and charismatic influences that Kennett exerted over the economic revolution and the disruptive force he potentially represented in the dialectical process of reaching a regulatory appeasement between the neo-liberal regime of accumulation and the citizens and state institutions’ reception of it.

Conclusion
While many social researchers struggle with the perennial spoiler of certainty, the struggle between agency and structure, in this context we have the unusual situation where Kennett, as the primary and most influential agent in the Victorian political economy at the time, was determined to foster the embedding of structure; in the form of a thoroughgoing neo-liberal revolution in the state. However, I argue, that the Big-Man-nature of Kennett’s approach to politics and the political economy more broadly, thwarted his own agenda for reform. His character and dominance made it impossible to make a positive claim for the embedding of neo-liberalism in Victoria.

Given Waquant’s claim that ‘neoliberalism [is] perhaps the biggest social constellation looming over us all’ (Wacquant 2013: 8) it would be difficult to argue that neo-liberal processes and practices are on-going in Victoria. However the consequent ‘consent’ through the inclusive participation of an ensemble of social norms, organisations and practices may be born out in the negative. In addition I would tentatively suggest that based on Victoria’s case and the experience of the Big Man Kennett and other neo-liberal reformers, that a period of Big Man politics is followed by a period of political reflection embodied in the election of a beneficent Chief to replace the Big Man-style politics.

References


Cain, J. (2001) unpublished interview


Gude, P. (2001) unpublished interview


Hamer, R. J. (2001) unpublished interview


