

❖ **Tanner, Lindsay - *Sideshow: Dumbing Down Democracy* Scribe Publications, Melbourne, 2011, pp. 232, ISBN 978-1-921844-0605**

Reviewed by Myra Gurney

It has been said that the media doesn't tell readers what to *think*, it tells them what to *think about*. The role of the media in the public conversation about politics is the central thesis of this recent book by Lindsay Tanner, recently retired ALP member for Melbourne and widely respected Rudd government Finance Minister.

In the twenty years since UK Minister for Trade, Lord Young, remarked that, "policies are like cornflakes, if they are not marketed, they will not sell", there has been a noted shift in the public discourse around politics, and politicians themselves have become the commodities to be marketed and sold by their parties at the behest of their media advisors. New forms of media have meant that the enactment of politics itself has become shaped by the needs and imperatives of the 24 hour news cycle which in turn is increasingly shaped by commercial imperatives.

Political parties are now thought of as *brands* which operate in the marketplace of public opinion which must be sold in digestible, visually engaging chunks and 30 second soundbites tightly crafted to fit the formula of the evening news, and policy is increasingly being shaped by focus groups. More broadly, globalisation and the rapid evolution of new forms of digital media are having a major impact on traditional media business models and media worldwide is undeniably in a state of flux. The role of journalism, and of journalists, is being challenged, with some, such as US media scholar Robert McChesney, arguing that objective journalism is in serious decline because of what he refers to as "commercial carpet bombing" (151).

Tanner's book continues this theme which has already been explored by a large number of international political communication and media theorists as well as by other recent Australian publications including ABC journalist Barrie Cassidy's (2010) *The Party Thieves*, Australian journalist George Megalogenis's (2010) Quarterly Essay *Trivial Pursuit*, ALP historian and former NSW Education Minister Rodney Cavalier's (2010) *Power Crisis*, and even the much maligned former ALP leader Mark Latham's (2005) *The Latham Diaries*. Each of these comments on the malaise that appears to be infecting politics and the public's engagement with politics, both in Australia and in Western liberal democracies more broadly. Tanner says in the introduction that his decision to leave politics and motivation to write the book was " ... the descent of our public life into the artificial media world of virtual reality. It's a lot easier to sacrifice family relationships in pursuit of big ideas and crucial reforms than for announceables and soundbites" (3) and that "while its outward forms remain in place, the quality of our democracy is being undermined from within. One of its critical components, a free and fearless media, is turning into a carnival sideshow" (1).

Tanner opens by acknowledging that his book is "a work of opinion and analysis" (7) but it is very well researched and forensically argued, referencing a large array of credible Australian and international academic and media sources. The book's central thesis is that there has been a significant decline in the past 20 or so years in the quality and tenor of political reporting and of journalism in general, as the *raison d'être* of newspapers and of electronic media more broadly, has shifted from a focus on straight reporting to a reframing of news as entertainment. This in turn he argues, has changed the way in which politicians themselves deal with the media, creating an increasing reliance on the role of media advisors and spin doctors. The result is politics driven by "mediathink" – that is, political decisions propelled by how policy will be played out in the media rather than by their substance, value or effect. "Genuine outcomes are completely swamped by transient appearances" (3) he contends.

The *pièce de résistance* cited is the widely derided, trivial media circus that was the 2010 Federal election, with its main protagonists being "The Real Julia" (or "Juliar" according to Alan Jones), and "Phoney Tony". The result as we know was a hung parliament and an electorate increasingly disengaged and cynical, seemingly unprepared to definitively give power to either of the major players. Within the current climate, politicians and political parties appear unwilling, or unable, to develop and prosecute serious political reform in the national interest rather than in the sole interest of swinging voters in marginal seats or in the interests of powerful groups like the mining industry or licensed clubs lobby group, with large budgets to spend on glossy advertisements.

Tanner's argument is measured, nuanced and complex and approaches the issue from a range of perspectives, and this is one

of the most valuable contributions of the book. His early chapters, which are the best, examine the evolution and reframing of politics as entertainment and in particular the role of the commercial television model in this evolution. He develops the argument famously posited by Neil Postman (1985) in *Amusing ourselves to death: public discourse in the age of show business*, that television "has made entertainment ... the natural format for the representation of experience" (16). Editors and producers he argues, are increasingly fearful that readers or viewers will be bored by any substantial treatment of policy, and political coverage has consequently been largely reduced to little more than the latest opinion poll and of the latest pseudo-events, stage managed for the nightly news: Tony Abbott scaling fish in an abattoir in a mock dialogue with workers about the impact of the carbon tax; Julia Gillard in a classroom taking a lesson, talking about the benefits of the *MySchool* website or in the ubiquitous hard hat and fluoro vest at a wind farm spruiking the economic and environmental benefits of renewable energy; Kevin Rudd comforting the young or the elderly in hospital trying to sell his health reforms.

Coverage of *policy*, the book argues, has largely given way to coverage of *politics* because media "is ravenous for conflict, splits, rows and failures ... and stories are presented through the lens of conflict between two parties or positions to maximize their dramatic qualities. Everything is focused on attracting attention and presenting the audience with simple choices of good or bad, or the red team or the blue team" (42). Any sniff of disagreement between party members over policy is automatically framed as "leadership crisis" or "party split", criticism is framed as "savage attack", a policy encountering difficulties is "in tatters," a few boatloads of asylum seekers becomes "an invasion".

The constant hyperbole and selective reporting more often than not distorts the readers' and viewers' perceptions, by manipulating emotions, and by exaggerating and misrepresenting risks. The current campaign (acknowledged by News Ltd chief John Hartigan) by elements of the News Limited stable against the Gillard government and the carbon tax is a good example, and Tanner concludes that it is the widespread misuse of language which is contributing to a subversion of public discourse (51).

Increasingly, it is argued here, the focus in political reporting is on the style and personality of the individual leaders rather than on the substance of their policies, and this mounting emphasis on celebrity "has been accompanied by a declining interest in factual accuracy" (82). The book gives numerous examples from Tanner's years as a senior minister with the Rudd government. Politics, and election campaigns in particular, (and these days we seem to be in one perpetual election campaign), are reported like a horse race and the focus of journalism, both tabloid and broadsheet, has shifted to what media theorist Margaret Simons describes as a "preoccupation of pitch over content" (68).

In this almost hostile environment, politicians have, Tanner argues, therefore had to adapt their communication strategies, relying increasingly on media professionals to help them navigate the treacherous waters. The criticism of politicians that in interviews they never answer questions directly is a response to what Tanner describes as "attack journalism" and a lot of media energy "is devoted to the search for gaffes" (41) leading to 'gotcha' political coverage (Tony Abbott's now famous admission to Kerry O'Brien – in 2010 – that without prepared and scripted remarks, his statements can't be taken as "absolute gospel" is a good example). The increasingly combative nature of interviews, where journalists repeatedly demand that a minister absolutely rule something in or out, and where failure to give a definitive answer is interpreted as the opposite position, has created the environment where vague, "non answers" and constant repetition of focus-tested key phrases, are the norm.

Tanner doesn't seek to hide his own complicity but remarks that "the overriding concern is to avoid getting into a tricky argument where there is a risk that you'll say something that can be misrepresented to your disadvantage" (94). Respected economics writer Ross Gittins has argued that one of the failings of the Rudd government was its "obsession with controlling the 24 hour news cycle" and that was central to its problem with implementing policies. Trapped in the inescapable vortex of doorstops, "photo ops" and "announceables", the ability of senior ministers to explain and defend complicated policies, ultimately atrophies. According to Gittins, "media minders' stock in trade is always to change the subject, never to stand and fight; to bamboozle, never to educate" (111).

Tanner has been criticised, mainly by those in the media at whom his critique is broadly aimed, of "blaming the messenger", and of offering no solutions to the problems he has outlined. He has also been criticised for failing to give closer coverage and more detailed examples of the failures of the Rudd government and his close colleagues. This is not entirely true, nor entirely fair.

The voice of the book is that of a detached observer and it was never intended to be *The Latham Diaries* volume 2. In interviews since the book's release, he defends this decision, fearing rightly I believe, that any attempt to "dish the dirt" on his colleagues would, in the parlance of political commentary, "consume all the oxygen" and detract from the serious point of his thesis. It would also, in the current climate where the legitimacy of Gillard and her minority government is under constant barrage, have provided further fodder for those on the conservative side of politics who seek to entrench the perception of a disunited government. In fact in a delicious piece of irony, on the day of the book's release, the Melbourne *Herald Sun* ran the headline, "Insider lets rip on Julia Gillard, Kevin Rudd governments, labeled 'dumb democracy'". Greg Jericho who writes the blog *Grog's Gamut*, commented that "this may actually be the first time a book's thesis has been completely proven correct before the book has even been officially launched."

Another of the criticisms of Tanner's critique has been that, while he gives plenty of examples of what he considers the lamentable and ultimately dangerous state of affairs, the culpability of politicians and political parties themselves is downplayed or insufficiently addressed. To some extent this criticism is justified. While he is quite up front about the fact that he often, reluctantly, "donned a floppy hat and did a song and dance" in order to garner attention, the role of the party machine and the undue influence afforded to the so-called "faceless men" does not feature in the analysis.

He quotes ex-British PM Tony Blair in his own defence who acknowledged that while too much time and resources are devoted in government to dealing with the media, to do otherwise would be "like asking a batsman to face bodyline without pads or headgear" (127). What he does not deal at all with the extent to which this has been driven partly by the changing nature of political representation, the dominance of the professional politician and the hollowing out (on all sides of politics) of genuine links between constituents and their elected representatives. Jonathan Green writing recently in *The Drum* about the appointment of former NSW ALP powerbroker Karl Bitar to lobby on behalf of James Packer and Crown against the pokie legislation, observed that, "And there lies a sobering truth of modern politics: it's simply a professional game played by people with no allegiance other than to the outcome required by the moment. It is a game of influence, opinion control and issue management, a sophisticated lark for the dispassionate professional. It is certainly no place for deeply held conviction."

The role of Stephen Mills' (1986) so called "new machine men" with their penchant for the techniques of marketing which treat politics and politicians as 'brands' to be packaged and managed, has the ultimate effect of elevating them into positions of power, often with far more influence than many elected representatives. Kevin Rudd's plummeting popularity in the polls after he reluctantly decided to follow advice to ditch his Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS), is an example of not only the tail wagging the dog, but the folly of over reliance on marketing and focus group research.

The second half of the book works hard to weave into a coherent narrative, the broader social, historical, cultural and economic changes that lie at the core of the current situation. Ultimately Tanner concludes that no one in particular is to blame but that the sideshow syndrome is symptomatic of a range of broader issues including major structural changes in Australian society. He cites theorists and commentators from Habermas to Chomsky who question the conventional mantra that journalism is a simply a service to democracy but who argue that news is as much a product to be bought, sold and marketed as sausages or furniture and the commercial imperative will always be predominant.

The culpability of readers and viewers is also raised, with the resurgence of populism being blamed on the developing "snack reading habits" encouraged and engendered by new forms of media – immediate, available, tasty and appealing, but ultimately empty of calories. The obsessive focus on the personal and the individual over the social, *Australian Foreign Affairs* editor Greg Sheridan concludes, is related to the impact of "the narcissistic identity obsessions of our age" on the political process (172). Tanner falls short of blaming the audience however he concludes that "it is difficult to determine whether declining interest in media coverage of politics reflects a decrease in interest in politics or a reaction to the way the media cover it" (176). He is not arguing that the answer is a simple matter of cause and effect relationship, and the later chapters draw on a potpourri of social and cultural theories to add extra layers to his analysis.

Finally, the major issue that needed to be given more space in the narrative of the dumbing down of political coverage in traditional news platforms, is the impact of new technologies like the internet and pay television. These have undermined traditional business models of newspapers and broadcast media, allowing readers and viewers to consume news through an increasingly large variety of personalised, niched platforms, forcing traditional media to reposition itself to cater for the remaining audience by making their offering more general and more entertaining. The consequence for newspapers in particular is fewer journalistic resources and tighter deadlines which is having the effect of forcing newsrooms into increasing reliance on pre-packaged secondary news product such as self serving press releases and tighter adherence to familiar frames into which the news can be more easily poured with guaranteed results.

The book concludes, perhaps justifiably, that the story ending remains to be told. "There is a serious problem confronting our society, but it isn't clear whether it is transitional or permanent in nature, nor whether it will eventually be corrected by market and social forces (191). While this is somewhat disappointing after what has gone before, overall it was refreshing to read a book written by a politician which valued intellectual contemplation of an important issue, free of the self serving "kiss and tell" ingredients which populate most political biographies. Finally Tanner notes that he doesn't expect the broader media to celebrate his insights as most are largely oblivious to their own culpability. Many in fact he says will be disappointed because "personal attacks and salacious revelations seem to sell well: abstract discussions about the future of democracy don't" (p6). For political junkies, as well as readers who are concerned about the substance of our democracy and the influence of media on our perceptions and lives more broadly, this is a highly readable, accessible and often entertaining and thoughtful book.

About the Reviewer

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