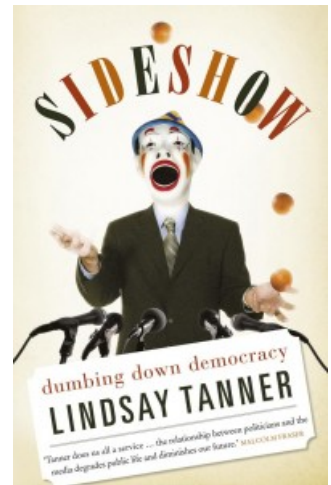


Review: Sideshow – Dumbing Down Democracy

I've been looking forward to reading former Federal Finance Minister, Lindsay Tanner's *Sideshow*. Tanner always came across as a thoughtful politician when he was in public office – it was clear his book was going to be no Lathemesque tell-all whinge but a critique of our governance in our society from a unique perspective.



But it isn't a groundbreaking revelation of the whys and woes of Australian politics. Tanner gives a thorough commentary – particular with regard to the events surrounding the 2010 federal election – but often he is simply shedding light on the bleeding obvious: our politics has become driven by spin, show-horses get more power than work-horses, and ideas and thoughtful governance are being forced to give way to the charade of “look like you're doing something and don't offend anyone important” (crf. p15).

Much of this book explores the codependent interplay between journalists and politicians. “Calm makes for terrible telly” – Tanner quotes Michael Roux on page 58 – and so politicians are forced to create drama and manhandle debate into narratives that excite but don't invite a consideration of social value.

There was a modicum of challenge for me: I was one of those who bemoaned the “Kath & Kim” nature of the last Federal election campaign which seemed ruled by focus groups made up of the disengaged. My opinion firmed up – let's get rid of compulsory voting – let the engaged people vote, and the disengaged exercise their abstention by default. Tanner

himself muses on the possibility (p208). The challenge is in the recognition that I am, perhaps, one of the “cultural elites” with “waning power... to enforce notions of respectability and community values across our society.” (p180). I hope not. I long not for enforcement but for engagement, yet we are caught in a spinning spiral of cynicism and childish, formulaic, leadership-by-the-numbers.

The book is a good read. It will continue to form some of the political engagement I have the opportunity to participate in these days. My one frustration was that Tanner does not leave us with a solution. I think perhaps it will take a crisis and a miracle to restore our national political integrity, let us pray they go together.

Q&A: Captcha-ing Spam

Over the weekend I get hit with 1000+ spam through the Q&A inputs on this blog.

This means, unfortunately, that I have had to implement the inconvenience of including a captcha input to prove the input is from a human.

It also means that if you have posted a question in the last four days I will not receive it as all new Q&A submissions for that period are being deleted.

Thanks,

W.

Q&A: When there are more rabbits beneath the church than believers attending, is it time to fold-up?

St Paul's Vestry asks: *When there are more rabbits beneath the church than believers attending, is it time to fold-up?*

Hi Vestry,

I don't know, there can sometimes be a *lot* of rabbits beneath the church – 10's, 100's! ☐

Your question goes to viability and numbers, but also goes to the essence of 'what is church' – what exactly would be "folded up"?

1) Essence of church – without wanting to put in a big ecclesiological treatise, let us say that a church is a local community of the people of God through which the Spirit is at work in the ministry of Word and Sacrament.

2) Numerical viability. At what numerical point does this essence disappear? Obviously you cannot have a church of one. Jesus talks about where "two or three are gathered" (Matthew 18:20) in the context of bearing witness to the truth in confronting sin – perhaps that's enough. Early churches, based on the synagogue model, expected 10 men to form the community – it might be myth, but I've heard this was the basis in early-Anglican-reformation days for only having a service of Holy Communion if 10 households signed up to receive it. More recently viability has been financially determined – the

ability to support a paid cleric who can provide the ministry of word and sacrament, or where the ministry is provided voluntarily and locally, to simply maintain the necessary organisational infrastructure. One wonders what the correlation to the essence of church is, however – after all a lounge room doesn't take much to maintain and it may have a lot of rabbits underneath!

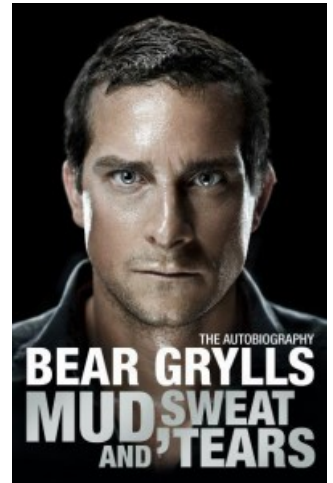
So if by “folded up” you mean ceasing to meet and no longer being church – my answer would be “not necessarily”, even “no!” – particularly if there were no other churches nearby.

If by “folded up” you mean something like “change the way in which the ministry is organised” or “sell the building” – my answer would be “probably” – but you wouldn't really be folding up, you would simply be changing the form in which the essence of the church is held.

Of course, if a group meets in the name of Christ only but is not essentially the church then it should either get serious or pack up and go home, irrespective of size or the local rabbit population.

**Review: Mud, Sweat, and
Tears: Bear Grylls The
Autobiography**

I've been known to say that (give or take the incarnation) the perfect man would be a cross between Bear Grylls and (ABC election analyst) Antony Green – perfect wildness, perfect geekiness. (I've since suggested that a seasoning of Jamie Oliver to the mix would improve even that perfection). Needless to say, I'm a big *Man vs Wild* fan, a show that resonates with the teenager in me that tramped through some interesting parts (both on-track and off-track) of the Tasmanian Wilderness. And the inner five year old that likes mud, guts and all things gross.



Which means I responded to the gift of Bear's autobiography with something of a girlish giggle. And now I've got round to reading it. Very quickly. Because it's hard to put down. It's written in short sharp chapters that have much the same pace as *MvW* tracing his survival journey through school, SAS training, and climbing Everest, with some reflective commentary on his more recent life at the end.

There were some surprises. I hadn't known Bear was an Eton old boy, for instance. I had assumed his faith was found later in life for some reason.

There were also some points of identification for me. The sense of drive built upon a complex childhood. The awkwardness with girls. The consuming danger of "never doing anything else of value with my life" (Page 372). The faith, built on an unashamed childlikeness of "Please, God, comfort me" (Page 93) resonates with my own, as well as the pattern of calling going through birth, death and resurrection (Page 181).

Bear admits he had to learn the art of story telling. He seems to have mastered it. The realism is such that I know that I do not ever want to offer for the SAS, or climb Mt. Everest – yet I am now more motivated to seize hold of the

purposes, plans and challenges that God has put before me. It has ignited a fire for further faithfulness and has provided pressure away from cruising through life.

I must admit to some jealousy. Half way through I found myself thinking "lucky bastard" in my head – to have had the opportunity to live life on the exciting edge must have required some good fortune that passes others (myself?) by.

But then I realised something: Bear gives the date of his arrival at the SAS barrack gates, March 23 1994. It was the same date that my wife and I started "going out." Since that date the adventure I have had, with stimulating wife and precious children, and the shared joys and fire of ministry and sickness and the evil black dog and all those other adversities is a true (ongoing) adventure. I'm just as much a lucky (grace-receiving) bastard as him, and given the tenor of the final family-man chapters of his book I think he would agree with me.