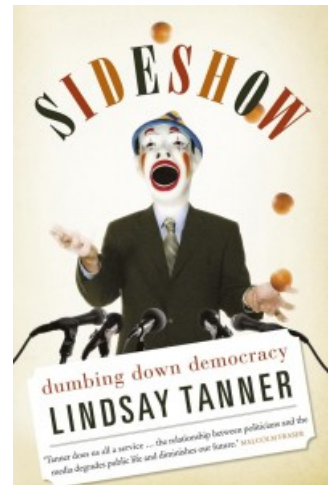


Review: Sideshow – Dumbing Down Democracy

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.