

The HARDLINE...

...according to Graham Richardson. The Left's great nemesis and born-again green was interviewed for ALR by David Burchell.

GRAHAM RICHARDSON was born in Kogarah, NSW, in 1949. He joined the Labor Party in 1966, and was NSW state organiser from 1971-76 and general secretary from 1976-83. In 1983 he was elected to the Senate, and from 1987 until April this year was Minister for the Environment. He is now Minister for Social Security, and is still recognised as the leading factional figure on the ALP's Right.

Prior to your accession to Cabinet you were one of the most recognisable factional figures in the ALP and one of the most disliked by your opponents...

That's certainly true.

But over the last seven years it seems to have become more difficult to identify people's positions on a range of political issues strictly by reference to their factional labels. In the current Cabinet, for instance, some people would identify the factional Right with rather pragmatic positions on a number of political questions, and at the same time there is a current of opinion, the 'economic rationalists', who overlap the factions, or at least the Right and Centre Left. Why do you think this growing separation of issues from factional labels arose and how significant is it?

Obviously within the factions there are differences on a lot of issues. Clearly within the Right I've got some fundamental differences with John Kerin on a number of issues,

particularly relating to the environment. That doesn't mean you can't both be in the Right. With the Centre Left, the views that John Dawkins has on economics are very different from those of Barry Jones or some of the South Australians.

And there are obviously differences within the Left: compare the views of Frank Walker with those of Brian Howe, for instance. In any factions there are differences, and those differences are allowed: you can't have a rigid adherence to every policy position. So that's blurred the lines to some extent. As well, I blurred the lines with the environment pretty badly and probably forever, because I was taking a more left-wing view than some of the Left. And I still do. Dawkins and Button have blurred the lines from the Centre Left's point of view by going much further to the Right on some economic issues than anyone in the Right. So with all of that happening it's hard to maintain the old labels.

When you describe yourself as more left-wing on the environment than some Left figures, and some members as being more right-wing on economic issues than many on the Right, that does seem to beg the question of what these terms actually mean these days. What do you mean when you say you're more left-wing on environmental issues?

I've taken the view that it's pretty hard to put a price on irreversible environmental damage and that jobs and economic wealth are not necessarily more important than the environment. That's put me at odds with most of my faction. If one goes back to the debates on the Tasmanian forests and Wesley Vale, I took a harder line than anyone in my group, than anyone in the Centre Left and than a lot in the Left. But I don't think that matters. You say: do the

labels actually mean anything? Of course, they do. If you look at the recent national conference, the meaning of the labels is pretty bloody obvious. We were seeking change, the Left were opposing it and the Centre Left finished up going along with us.

In the past you've been the great bogey of the Left, particularly in NSW. What do you think about the effectiveness of the parliamentary Left in the ALP at present?

The Left has changed a lot. And it had to change. It evolved as an organisation which controlled the Labor Party most of the time, because most of the time we were in opposition. The Left will never control government. So they had to adjust how they acted in government. And I think they've adapted pretty well. I'm not just saying that because you're from *Australian Left Review*. By and large they're constructive. For all my bogeyman reputation, I have a lot of meetings with the Left, and I am their natural ally on a range of issues. Some of them are hopeless: some of them have absolutely no idea about running a modern economy, but most of them now have a good idea about what that takes. Look at the record — when in the last few years have we had a clash?

What about the recent conference?

What you saw at the national conference was the Left's Second XI speaking, and they spoke because the First XI didn't agree with what the Second XI was saying. The Second XI had a very narrow majority in the Left caucus. Look at the list of speakers. Where was George Campbell? He didn't speak because he didn't agree with the Left position. Where was Brian Howe? The lions of the Left weren't there. You're only going to have a real clash when the lions of both sides — lions or Christians, depending on where you stand — get involved.

Yet the more pragmatic position that people like Howe had in the privatisation debate fared no better than the more straightforward oppositional position of others on the Left.

I think Howe's view was shared by a lot of people on the Left. They didn't win, because they didn't get the numbers in the Left.

I'd like to ask a quite different question about the Labor Party now. There have obviously been a number of recent decisions — for instance those arising from the September national conference and on the South East forests — that have upset a lot of Labor's rank and file...

The suggestion that the South East forests decision has upset a lot of Labor's rank and file is nonsense. The decision hasn't ever been explained, and obviously there are people who'll say you should have reserved more. But to say that Labor's rank and file feels that way is silly. The trade union rank and file would certainly have a different view.



Okay, let's just say that that decision alienated a particular segment of Labor's rank and file. Then didn't the privatisation decisions alienate another important segment? Haven't there been many decisions which have confused, demoralised or angered significant tracts of Labor's rank and file?

Yes, I'd certainly agree with that. The decision which has enraged Labor's rank and file more than any other is the Commonwealth Bank. Everything else pales into insignificance. In fact, had the Commonwealth Bank decision not been taken, I think we'd have got Left agreement on the Telecom decision. But there's an incredible amount of bitterness about the bank — not just from the Left, but from all sides. There's hardly a Labor Party branch anywhere that would have passed a resolution supporting that decision. And that's very serious for us. The trouble is when you're in government it's not possible to go to all the branches and say, "Do you think we should do this?", when you're confronted with a deadline and when, unless you make a quick decision, you risk the savings of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of ordinary working people. So you don't have the option of going to the branches. But we've made a decision which has really upset them, and we'll have to explain that decision. I think it's already calmed down a lot, and it will calm down completely once they've got a real explanation about what we've done and why. But I think we've taken them about as far as we can. I would hope that we don't stretch their loyalty any more than we've already have.

It seems that it's very difficult to keep people in the Labor Party at the moment, regardless of factional

alignments. And this seems to be simply the latest and most acute expression of a longer term trend — that the membership base of the ALP is shrinking quite sharply. There is a strong perception in the party that many members don't have any useful role to play in the deliberations of the party, and that all they have to do is pass resolutions supporting, or objecting to, government actions.

In the NSW ALP we had 23,000 members in March 1983 and we have 15,000 now. That's a hell of a drop. And each state branch has experienced a similar drop. Of course, that's not all because we've sold the Commonwealth Bank. I think there are a number of reasons. First, Australia is becoming less and less a nation of joiners. Fewer and fewer people are ready to go to meetings of any kind, whether they're the local Lions Club or the ALP. The Liberal Party's membership has been devastated since the late 60s, and, while the National Party's membership is still far higher, nobody ever goes to meetings. Membership is simply dependent upon an annual bank draft. So the political parties in Australia can't attract members, and that's a real worry. The other reason is that the Labor Party's always been a party of opposition. You can get a lot of members and more involvement in opposition because conservative governments do horrible things to working people. The outrage becomes greater and so do the numbers who want to fight them. This is the first time we've had to digest a long period of government — except for Curtin and Chifley between 1941 and 1949, though that was largely during a war.

So if the government were defeated at the next election, would the membership bounce back?

Yes. It won't bounce back to where it was, but it will grow as the realisation of how horrible a conservative government is grows. It's now all right to say: "You've strayed from the true path; you no longer have the faith. You've sold the Commonwealth Bank and you've opened Telecom up to competition and you don't care about us any more." That's fine and well, but when the conservatives come in they will cut \$3 billion off government spending — mostly from social security, which hurts Labor's base, the real poor. Then the ALP won't look so bad.

You say people aren't joining things. Phillip Toyne says they're joining, but not political parties. They're joining the ACF or the Wilderness Society.

They're not joining the ACF; they're paying money to the ACF. They pay money and get a newsletter. They don't go to meetings. We have a meeting-based membership.

On that logic do you see a future for the ALP where the membership isn't meeting-based?

It is my fervent and earnest hope that we'll always have a meeting-based membership, but we'll get more and more people who'll just send us money and want to be associated with us in some way. But we have to maintain our meeting-based system, because it's the only contact we have with the grassroots. How are you going to know what they think if you don't have meetings?

I'd like to go back to the South East forests decision for a moment. That decision greatly upset the various environmental groups. Phillip Toyne commented that it was another example of ad hockery. The government has been trying to move towards a more planned model for sustainable development, but how are you going to keep people supporting this model of sustainable development if you continue to make decisions which look like unhappy trade-offs?

The environment movement loves us when we make decisions they like and hates us when we don't. And when you make decisions like this one, you get accused of ad hockery. Whatever is said about the South East forest decision you can't say it's ad hoc. There was 12 months of study, there was a wealth of evidence collected, sifted, analysed and debated. That's not ad hockery.

The environmental groups would argue that the decision wasn't the logical outcome of that evidence...

With the South East forests there's a complicating factor. With the Tasmanian forests we had World Heritage material — four-hundred-year old trees and that sort of stuff. We had a jewel. You haven't really seen a big campaign mounted to have the South East forests nominated for World Heritage listing. They aren't in the same category. If there are levels of wonder, here we're talking B-grade wonder. Had they been eligible for World Heritage listing, I'd have done it. You can't argue that every old-growth forest is untouchable. We've got to preserve as much of them as we can. I understand the anger and the criticism but in these situations we need to focus on scientific information and we need science-based decisions. The difficulty is that when science-based decisions don't please people they say it's crooked science.

But scientific evidence by itself doesn't allow objective decision-making — it's often ambiguous or contradictory.

You have to look at the weight of evidence, what else can you do? It's not an exact science, obviously.

Can we turn now to social security? You were recently quoted as saying that there were no further cuts to be made in the social security budget and that you would have no part of it if such cuts had to be made.

What I said was that we would have to hurt a lot of people at the bottom end of the scale to make any more cuts. And I actually used the phrase "I would resist that very strongly". I have resisted it in this budget and was successful. The same options have been trotted out budget after budget and been rejected. There was a big savings task before us in this Expenditure Review Committee [ERC] round, and I found ways to get savings without taking money out of anyone's pocket unless they're involved in fraud. I don't think the government will change tack on this: it's rejected those options every year. My personal view is that we can really do no more.

The article definitely gave the impression that you would not accept further cuts. So that's not what you meant?

In the interview I said I didn't think further cuts were acceptable. I was then asked: "What would you do about it if there were further cuts?" And I said that I didn't think there would be further cuts and so I didn't think I needed to make a pronouncement on what I'd do about it. And I don't think there will be any further cuts.

On the subject of the budget process, you've also been quoted as saying that because social security is the largest spending ministry it's the first place people look to when they want to make cuts.

That's true.

Is that focus on social security reasonable? There seems to be a view that because social security is a spending department rather than a productive department the money spent in the department goes into a black hole.

There's often a view in the bureaucracy which prepares the options for the ERC that some expenditure in social security is discretionary. I don't think it is, but some people think it is. You've got to accept the right of the Department of Finance, for example, to prepare options to cut expenditure. There has to be a devil's advocate — someone who stands up and says you can cut this and this and this — so that the government can look at every option. That's what the budget process is about.

Many in the welfare sector would argue that one of the problems with the budget process is that some items — for instance, subsidies to industry — aren't viewed as burdens to the taxpayer in the same way that welfare expenditure is.

Well, they're wrong. Every avenue is looked at each year. And there aren't too many tax subsidies around these days. With the capital gains tax and the fringe benefits tax we've eliminated a lot of the tax subsidies. I think we've tightened up enormously on what business can write off on tax. I don't think we've got sufficient credit from the professional social welfare organisations for doing that.

Another criticism from the welfare sector comes from people who aren't opposed to the active employment strategy itself, but who say that this is a very bad time to be embarking on such a process. Won't it put more pressure on the unemployed at a time of growing unemployment and a big economic downturn?

Obviously it's a time of growing unemployment and it's hard to get a job, and this puts pressure on people who are being asked to undergo training or demonstrate activity in looking for a job. But it's all cyclical. And you can't have a policy that operates when employment's growing and stops when employment isn't growing.

Yes, but their point is the timing of the introduction of the strategy.

Frankly some social welfare organisations wouldn't agree with it whenever you introduce it. We've been working on it for a long time, and the announcement of its introduction came some time ago, when the situation wasn't so bad. In any event no one loses benefits as a result of training or activity tests — they're just being asked to do more. If you can show that you looked for a benefit and didn't get it, your weekly payments will keep coming. I don't think that's wrong, whether or not it's popular now.

One final question. A lot of people are saying that the problem with the mainstream political parties, and particularly the ALP, is a lack of vision. The government has over the last seven years made a number of decisions which have not struck people as being in line with traditional Labor values, and this has demoralised many people. What kind of values, what kind of vision, do you think could sustain Labor and its supporters into the 21st century?

I'm not sure what you mean. Our policies on the environment over the last few years could not be described as anything but visionary. We have taken some courageous decisions on major environmental questions. I think the greenhouse emissions decision recently demonstrated that vision is alive and well in this government, and is not about to disappear. When you turn to economic policy and people say our traditional values have disappeared, the truth is that every Labor leader since Federation has been accused of abandoning Labor's traditional values. For Curtin it was conscription; for Chifley it was the mines; for Whitlam it was tariffs; for Hawke it is the Commonwealth Bank.

Every Labor leader has the same accusation put at them. But Chifley didn't face what we've faced. Chifley didn't have situations where individuals typing figures into screens in five or six capitals around the world could shape the destiny of nations and change economies overnight. With the internationalisation of the economy the old values don't apply. The whole basis to which they were supposed to apply is gone. Labor's vision is about adjusting to that new problem, and making sure that in the adjustment all those whom we've traditionally represented, all those who need help and protection, keep getting it, even though it's harder to deliver. I think we've got a tremendous record of doing it in the last few years.

For all the talk about abandoning traditional values, look at the work that Howe's done in the last few years in social security. Looking after the battler is supposed to be one of our traditional values. Well, if that's the yardstick by which you judge, then this government is as traditionally Labor as any which has preceded it.