

Fortress LABOR

Labor's membership crisis looks like a crisis of party democracy. Adam Farrar begs to disagree. Giving ALP members more influence on Labor governments isn't the answer, he argues. A wider relationship between party and community is called for.

Remember the early years of the Hawke government? It may be a little hard now to recall the defeat of Paul Keating's consumption tax, when Left unions, the community sector and the ALP Left showed that, combined in the sort of public forum produced fleetingly in Hawke's 'national consensus' days, they amounted to something.

It's been a long time since that type of public victory was last won. For a while it looked as though the Left had done it again by heading off privatisation at the last ALP Conference. But that 'victory' is looking a bit hollow now. Its real legacy may have been finally to push power brokers to break the inconvenient hold that conference — and ultimately ordinary branch members — had on the government and the Cabinet.

But before the Left outside the ALP begins its ritual gloating at the problems of those who chose to work within the ALP, they should pause for a minute to ask whether the issue isn't more than a matter of the Left getting rolled, but a more fundamental issue of whether - and if so, how - political parties can be effective vehicles for social change. The problem of inner party democracy in the ALP is not just a matter of how the parliamentary leadership can be made to stick to policies won by the rank and file. More importantly, it is a matter of how the political practice

available to parties bears on the practice of activists. It is a matter of whether the conception of the party in the ALP, and in other parties of social change, is responsible for their steady decline.

The current ALP debate over inner party structures and control might seem a spectator sport to those outside. But an examination of that debate might also throw up some of those wider questions. One of the most interesting is the way in which the, by now rather glib, question of how political parties (as opposed to governments) relate to social groups such as environmentalists, welfare lobbyists and so on has become linked to a perception that these new groups are undermining democracy, both within parties and in the wider community.

A loose debate has been going on for some time. Last year, for example, Stuart Macintyre argued in *Australian Society* that new political groups such as the Rainbow Alliance and the New Left Party would be wrecked by diverse and often conflicting interests as they try to cobble together different movements. On the other hand, he argued, the Labor Party with its old monoculture breaking down, was a far more useful place for the activists of these two organisations.

In the August issue of *ALR* Stuart provided a rather more interesting account of the new composition of ALP branches. Replacing "the precipitate decline in the original base of the party, the manual wage earners" are, for example, women and people from non-English speaking

backgrounds. But these new members are often public administrators or "in social movements competing for the attention of the government". To an extent this is reproducing within the party what has already happened at the level of government, where peak bodies - not just the ACTU or the BCA, but the Conservation Foundation (ACF) or the Council of Social Service (ACOSS) have been given, to varying degrees, a direct line to the ALP in power which has increasingly been denied to party members.

The question of democracy within the ALP, of keeping the parliamentary leadership committed to the policies of the party, has now become the crucial issue for the ALP Left (and for many branch members). But Macintyre's observations seem to raise a deeper question: from what kind of influences should party policy arise? This seems to signal some very special worries which are somewhat cloaked by a focus on democratic control over policy.

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Macintyre was responding to Lindsay Tanner who argued in ALR's June issue that ALP structures and the factions themselves were such an impediment to participation and democracy that they must change dramatically if its current decline is not to be terminal. Lindsay argued that the interaction and alliances between new political currents were such that the old factional divisions are being blurred on many issues, that binding factional decisions are no longer appropriate and that interest groups should be added to the party structures to attract activists in specific areas to the ALP.

While accepting most of Tanner's description of the disease, Stuart Macintyre argues that the answer does not lie in structural changes to faction power or branch structures, but rather "a fundamental revitalisation of Labor Party politics on the basis of principle rather than expediency". This basis, Macintyre argues, must include an urgent revision of the "broad ideological tradition which spans a spectrum from labourism to socialism".

This contrast between 'principle' and 'expediency' is perhaps a more useful way of characterising the concern about Labor in government than to focus exclusively on the formal democratic rights of members. But it raises again the crucial question of where and how the principles are to be found. It raises the question (for all such parties) of whether such principles might well be found outside the party's 'traditional base', outside its membership, or out-

side the territory carved up by the formal faction structures. Much of the debate, however, seems concerned to defend these influences against the incursions of outsiders.

It is hard not to read much of the debate as an argument over who the most politically 'genuine' influences are. Nor is it restricted to a choice between members and outsiders. The long-running debate in the ALP Left over the influence of affiliated unions relative to branch members is part of the same concern. Bob Hogg's most recent suggestion that union amalgamations will reduce the diversity of union views and hence the vitality of the party is an attempt to shift the weight of influence towards branch members. The efforts of some on the Left to increase union influence seems based on the rather questionable view that unions constitute a sounder socialist base.

A number of the same concerns were also taken up in the recent draft National Left position on Bob Hogg's Organisational Review Committee prepared by the convenors of the National Left; and it's clear that Tanner, as well as Hogg, inspired some of the comments. Like Macintyre, the authors argue that the answer to the ALP's malaise is not structural but, rather, requires political solutions. Unlike Macintyre, they don't challenge the kind of politics required, beyond arguing that the ALP must return to policies which improve the life chances of ordinary people, particularly those on incomes of about average award wage levels, must base itself in local political activity and must ensure more broadly based participation of members in the policy development of the party.

It is particularly striking that the National Left draft, rather than seeking to broaden the basis of the party's ideological base to embrace new forces for social change, insists that the task is to "reassert [the] political and ideological identity" of the labour movement, placing other popular concerns in an ideological and class context. Interestingly, exactly the same words, "a holistic ideology that can incorporate the needs and aims of those who presently cluster about it", appear in both Macintyre's article and in the Left's draft. However, in the latter the sense changes from an assertion of the need for a revised basis to a reassertion of the centrality of the role of economic forces.

It is probably not unreasonable to suggest that this hardly offers an attractive alternative to those social activists who find that they can be more effective bypassing the party and going straight to the government. But it is this bypassing that is of most concern. "At times it appears that to have any influence on Labor governments, one is in a better position as a member of any organisation other than the Labor Party itself."

Both Macintyre and the National Left draft identify the same two problems mentioned above. First, the government's 'corporatist' approach means that the government deals with peak bodies rather than activists in or out of the ALP. And second, the policies of both party and government are increasingly being set by the party bureaucracy.

There is some irony in the fact that, two years ago, the Left flirted briefly with the option of including one of the social change groups — the community welfare sector — directly in its policy making; thus breaking the peak body-to-government nexus. It was a bold experiment prompted by some of those Left unions who had already begun to work with such groups. Sadly, the experiment was abandoned after just one ALP Left/Left unions meeting. It all seemed too much, even on the Left, to have ALP strategies scrutinised by those who hadn't joined the party. The fact that a number of the representatives of Left unions may also not have been members (although their union was) somehow wasn't seen as inconsistent.

For the ALP Left, then, the ability of those organisations outside the party with an interest in social change to gain effective access to the party or government is seen as a serious threat to party democracy. It is then not too much of a step to see this as a threat to the broader identity between a vigorous membership and the labour movement and working people which the party was established to represent.

Ultimately, however, this reaction reflects a discomfort with the notion of a participatory democracy which the various social change groupings represent. On that model of democracy, people contribute, wherever they are involved, to decisions affecting their areas of involvement. On that model, the structures of consultation and decision making reach right into the community, drawing directly on the knowledge and desires of its members. 'Participation' is, after all, one of the four cornerstones of Labor's social justice strategy.

While it would be laughable to suggest that the links between government and peak lobby groups is an unequivocal example of participatory democracy, it would be an even bigger mistake to be blind to the extent of such processes in Australia today — however frustrating their operation and however often they are misunderstood or subverted. Both formal processes such as joint planning in, say, the Home and Community Care program or the plethora of advisory committees, and the practical interventions from deep in the community by organisations like the Nursing Mothers Association or the Combined Pensioners Association, mean that — however vexed — the sharp line between community and state is being broken again and again.

These are the very mechanisms which a politics of social change should be seeking to build on, rather than pushing them away in defence of party prerogatives. It must be remembered that the ALP itself is one such experiment — an attempt to provide a link between working people and the state through their labour organisations and a participatory party. But the lives of ordinary Australians embrace needs, issues and activities which are simply outside the sphere of the labour movement or the world of paid work. A century on, it no longer makes much sense that the labour movement should be the only movement to have its own political party. Nor does it make much

sense, as the Nuclear Disarmament Party showed, for every movement to have its own party.

However, the Labor Left draft seems concerned to maintain the division between the genuinely political — embodied in the party which, in turn, provides access to the state — and mere interest or single issue campaigns. Not only is such a distinction undesirable (and arrogant insofar as it gives priority to the labour movement), but it may well be a lost cause — a 19th century politics which has outrun its time. A far more progressive alternative may well be to work to build more effective mechanisms to help participatory politics to evolve.

Nor should it require every activist to join a political party. They should have avenues of access which are real, but which don't co-opt or drain their efforts. It must be remembered that social change activists are caught in a similar bind to rank and file ALP members. Many of the peak lobby groups move in a world which is just as distant from their constituencies. Nor are activists' needs for access, debate, co-operation with other activists likely to be satisfied by their relation to their peak representatives.

But what does this mean for political parties? It may mean that parties will continue to decline in importance as direct lines of influence on governments — at least for most activists. For those in the ALP who are challenged by the internal workings of party machines, the challenge will be less to ensure that the party — particularly in government — responds to the rank and file than that it should be receptive to claims of the social change groups outside the party.

Of course, social change groups or 'movements' are not homogeneous (any more than the union movement) — even when they have not formalised their differences into Left and Right groupings. Fundamental political and social values will determine which positions should be responded to; which makes the ideological framework of the party or faction its crucial contribution to the political process.

For those parties of social change outside the ALP electoral politics may well become more important than it has been — but it is likely to become a politics of coalitions and consultation. While the party can provide a co-ordinating framework for such electoral work, its legitimacy will depend on the extent to which it has become a forum for cross fertilisation and debate — how much it has become an honest broker and how clearly it can articulate and relate the values of social change across the board.

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This is the fourth in our series of articles on the future of Labor. Previous contributions were by Lindsay Tanner (June), Stuart Macintyre (August) and Robert Ray (October).
