

Labourism's **LAST DAYS**

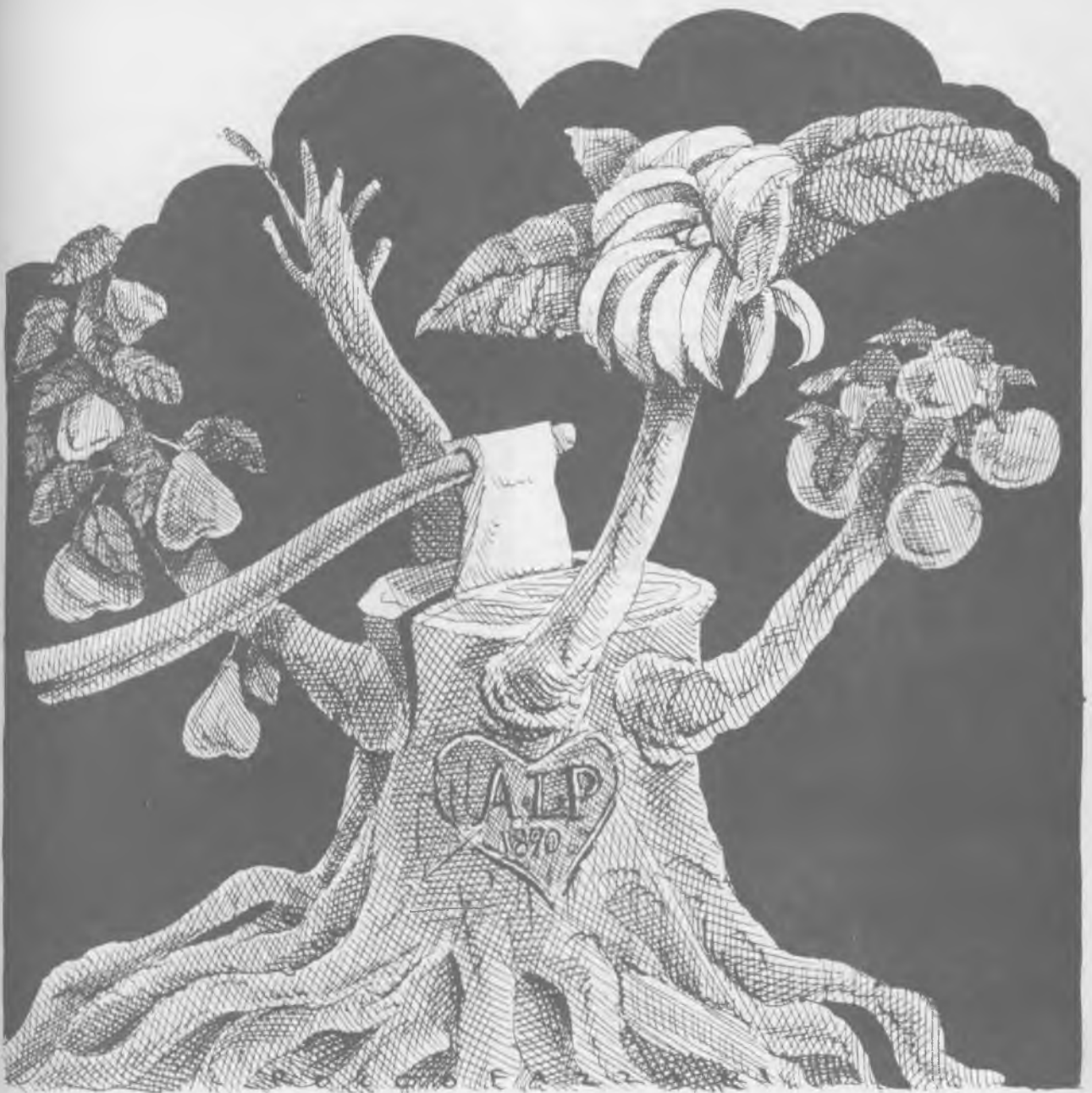
A year ago Lindsay Tanner opened our discussion on the future of the ALP. Here he surveys the debate and proposes more unsettling thoughts. Labor's malaise is not just a crisis of membership, he argues. Rather, labourism itself is in its death throes, and it has no obvious successor.

The public debate on the future of the Australian Labor Party's structure and organisational approach is now over a year old. It is set to reach a crescendo at the party's centenary National Conference in late June. At that conference, four interconnecting themes will dominate a debate which will be critical in determining the party's future.

In my June 1990 ALR article "Labor's Turbulent Tribes", which helped set off that public debate, I commented: "Divisions within existing Labor factions are becoming as significant as divisions between factions". Subsequent events, particularly in Victoria, have made this comment

seem almost prophetic. A few years ago the prospect of the Hard Left splitting from the Left in an open and organised way and doing a preselection deal with the Right would have been almost unthinkable. The fact that it has occurred in Victoria is a symptom both of the organisational decay of the Labor Party and the gradual erosion of the existing factional landscape.

The emergence of the Pledge Unions group in Victoria is illustrative of the increasingly dominant axis of division within the Labor Party—a division which straddles factional boundaries. The division is between those who may be described as "rationalist" and others who may be seen as "traditionalists" (or in each other's opinions, "sellouts" and "troglodytes"). It is seen on both Left and Right in the Labor spectrum, and is reflected in the catch-cries surrounding



Graphic: Rocco Fazzari

the debate on structures, such as "returning to our traditional base" or "adapting in a changing world".

The rationalists in both Left and Right are keen on the Accord, still generally enthusiastic about the importance of being in government, supporters of award restructuring and union amalgamation, and strongly influenced by developments in other Western countries. They have substantially relaxed or even abandoned their commitment to certain articles of Labor faith such as public ownership, non-intervention in other people's wars, and day-to-day maintenance of workers' living standards. The Rationalists tend to be corporatist, managerial and "modern" in their approach, and are often highly educated. The ACTU leadership, the Centre Left and the Socialist Forum group

in Victoria are prime examples of this tendency. It is also manifested in the Right through Ministers such as David White and Neil Pope in Victoria and Simon Crean federally. Rightwing Rationalists are seen as people whom the Left (or, rather, the Rationalist Left) "can work with", and vice versa.

The Traditionalists are either suspicious of or openly opposed to the Accord, disillusioned not only with current Labor governments but in some cases even with the concept of trying to govern, wary of award restructuring, generally opposed to union amalgamations as envisaged by the ACTU, and much more autarkic in their general outlook. Their commitment to key articles of faith remains largely unaffected by recent experience of government and

international change. Traditionalists dislike the corporatist approach of the Rationalists, and are usually suspicious of the highly educated. The ALP Right in New South Wales is strongly divided, essentially on Rationalist-Traditionalist lines, and in Victoria there exists a similar division within the Right—although the Rightwing Traditionalists do not differ quite so starkly from the Rationalists in their group. The NSW Electrical Trades Union disaffiliation from the ALP is a clear illustration of a Traditionalist perspective in action on the Right. The Labor Unity/Pledge Unions preselections deal in Victoria is another good example: although obviously engendered by a number of factors, this deal was primarily an alliance between Traditionalists from different parts of the political spectrum.

These generalised descriptions inevitably span an extremely diverse collection of groupings and individuals. Other axes of division such as Left-Right are obviously still very important. However, political divisions while rooted in history are always fashioned and redefined by contemporary events. The big issues of the day facing the Australian Labor movement are producing more polarisation between Rationalist and Traditionalist than between Left and Right. This Rationalist-Traditionalist polarisation will be at the heart of the June National Conference debate, and will cut across factional boundaries. This is already occurring: ACTU President Martin Ferguson has come out in support of reducing union influence in the ALP against strong opposition from much of both the Left and Right.

In the longer term, both forces have to confront the fact that most of the structures on which traditional ALP faith has been founded—protectionism, conciliation and arbitration, high living standards and trade union strength—are in the process of being drastically weakened or destroyed by international forces beyond our control. The ALP can develop a Rationalist or Traditionalist response to these changes: neither outcome is likely to be particularly palatable.

The second theme which will underpin the National Conference is the culture of Labor politics in Australia. Unfortunately, the ALP is saddled with a political culture dominated by arrogance, exclusivity and intellectual rigidity in an era in which these characteristics are alien to most ordinary people. Reforming this culture is inextricably linked with reform of party structures.

The popular images evoked by Labor politics in Australia—macho aggression, harsh conflict, and upward mobility into the ruling class—are out of date. These images are no better represented than in the persona of Paul Keating. Keating's admirers may feel that he represents a new policy approach for the 90s, free of outdated Labor shibboleths, but in style and approach he is really a Labor politician of the 40s. The arrogance, the aggression, the Bankstown boy making good among the toffs are essentially antiquated images which no longer strike a chord among ordinary Australians.

Labor's traditional arrogance towards non-Labor forces on the left of the spectrum and its unspoken assumption of a

divine right to rule at least half of that spectrum have left the party in an extremely vulnerable state. The ALP's membership is tiny and the resources devoted to its education and development are minimal. The union base is eroding, and financial support from business is drying up rapidly. If the Liberals win the forthcoming federal election, public funding will be abolished and compulsory voting may likewise be scrapped. Most community organisations naturally sympathetic to Labor have been alienated, and in the Green/Democrat/Independent axis they have an emerging practical alternative.

And yet, despite these grim signs, the arrogance and complacency lives on. The Labor Unity/Pledge Unions preselection deal in Victoria involves imposing candidates on "safe" Labor seats who neither live in the area nor have any involvement in the local community. The Treasurer talks about the "recession we had to have" as unemployment races past 10%. And Bob Hogg says that "National Conference is run in a pretty relaxed manner" (ALR, April 1991). In fact, with its plethora of television cameras and lights, dark-suited businessmen and diplomats, and arrogant ministers pouring contempt over dissenting delegates, National Conference is about as accessible to the ordinary ALP activist as a meeting of the United Nations General Assembly.

Labor's culture and approach is in need of radical overhaul. And, contrary to the objections of those who respond to any proposal for structural tinkering, changing structures is an essential element in reforming culture and approach. Existing structures are the most concrete manifestation of existing culture, and therefore an ideal place to start a reform process.

The issues of political culture which must be addressed have been fairly well canvassed in the debate over the past year: integration into the community, democratisation of processes, softening of style, and genuinely equal participation of women are some of the key the mess. Moreover, we must acknowledge, albeit reluctantly, that exploration of such issues leads inevitably to reconsideration of the very basis of the ALP itself, labourism.

The ultimate factor which shapes and sustains the features of a major political movement is the self-image of those who actively support it. The Labor Party was founded by and is still notionally based on ordinary people who see themselves as workers and whose lives are dominated by their participation as employees in the production process and the various consequences of that involvement.

Increasing living standards, shorter working hours, improvements in transport and communications, diversification of economic structures and relationships and changing family structures have seriously eroded the strength of the labourist ethos in popular consciousness. The collective self-image of Australian workers is radically different from and much more complex than that of the 40s. The ready identification with "labour" as a reflection of one's own basic existence is nowhere near as prevalent as it once was. The 25-year-old secretary—a very typical Australian worker in the 90s—tends not to see herself as a



Graphic: Placido Fontana

"The true choice we are facing is 60:40 or 0:100"

"worker" or see her employment relationship as the overwhelmingly dominant factor in her life. Eventually, this erosion of labourist political culture must have its effect on the Labor movement and its institutions.

The managerial corporatism of the Rationalists in the Labor movement is both a product of and a contributor to this trend. The growing tendency for key industrial and political decisions to be determined by government-ACTU deals and top-level negotiations not only causes alienation among rank-and-file workers: it is, in itself, a product of a long process of gradual alienation from labourism. Sadly, corporatism has flourished because most of the rank and file aren't all that interested any more.

The ironic consequence of this analysis is a conclusion that those concerned about sustaining the ALP's relevance who focus on the Socialist Objective miss the point. In reality it is the party's real essence, labourism, which is in decline in the community. Support for socialism has never been great in Australia but, to the extent that it has enjoyed greater adherence in times past, it was really as a legitimised adjunct to labourism. As genuine allegiance to labourism has declined, so has adherence to socialism.

Labourism is no more under threat than on the issue of trade union affiliation to the ALP. Because of labourism's decline, the link between the unions and the ALP is now the soft underbelly of the Labor movement. Union affiliation does not enjoy strong support among union members

or Labor voters. Those who aim to maintain a union-based political party with a powerful presence in mainstream Australian politics (and I am obviously one) ignore this fact at their peril.

The proposal from Bob Hogg to reduce the ratio of union to branch involvement in ALP decision-making from 60:40 to 50:50 is an unintentional diversion from the real issue. The true choice we are facing is 60:40 or 0:100.

There are numerous reasons why the institution of union affiliation is under threat. Apart from the decline of labourism and the fact that ordinary workers are not very enthusiastic about it generally, the gap between the interests and obligations of the two wings of the movement has progressively widened as Australian society has diversified. Can anyone now envisage a situation such as that which prevailed in Western Australia until the early 60s where the state ALP branch and the peak trade union body were one and the same? ALP-affiliated trade unions now only represent about 25% of Australia's workers, and are overwhelmingly blue collar. The decline and now demise of the Communist Party has meant that non-ALP union leaders are in general much less committed to the institution of ALP affiliation than their predecessors of previous generations. And most importantly, the union-ALP link will be targeted for destruction by future Liberal governments. If things remain as they are at present, their task may not be too difficult.

The challenge for the Labor movement is to revitalise trade union affiliation to the ALP—and very quickly. If the nexus is not restructured such that it is genuinely supported by affiliated trade union members, it will probably wither and die. The actual proportion of union power in party decision-making, 60:40 or 50:50, is a pretty marginal consideration. The key change which is required is a shift in the centre of gravity of trade union participation in ALP affairs away from union hierarchies and more towards the domain of trade union activists and members. The prospective creation of "super unions" through amalgamations will increase this need: the fewer hands in which union power within the ALP is held, the more vulnerable the entire institution of union affiliation will become.

Any real attempt at preserving the union-ALP nexus may require consideration of some rather startling options, such as permitting affiliation only on the basis of union members who opt for an ALP link, or even reconstituting union affiliates as the foundation for special interest branches. Such ideas may appear drastic, but unless the trade union movement itself addresses the problem creatively, union affiliation could hit the proverbial iceberg and sink without trace while union officials stand on the deck valiantly chanting "sixty-forty, sixty-forty" to the tune of "Nearer My God to Thee".

The fourth and perhaps most obvious theme which will dominate the National Conference is how Labor's national decision-making processes should be structured. The inevitable conflict which is brought into focus by this issue is that between democracy and short-term organisational interests.

It is clear that the balance between these essentially competing interests is now so heavily weighted against democracy that it actually also threatens short-term organisational interests such as staying in government. How far the present imbalance needs to be corrected is a matter for debate. Those who assert the literal supremacy of party conferences over governments need to consider just how far such a supremacy should go. In reality, it can only ever be a moral supremacy, no matter how much it is inscribed in stone, because elected MPs owe obligations to their electors as well as to their party. This fact has been starkly exposed by the behaviour of recent Labor governments. The true impotence of the party organisation has been exposed—and what can members do about it? Tearing the party apart through expulsions or removal of preselections is no real solution, because members may find it very difficult to put the pieces back together again. There is no genuine solution other than to work on restoring moral supremacy while acknowledging that the days of a relatively homogeneous and well-disciplined Labor movement in politics may well be over.

Taking this view and obvious numerical realities into account, Bob Hogg's proposed mechanisms for national ALP decision-making merit some support. Separating out the genuinely administrative functions of the National Executive and vesting them in a small National Administrative Committee is a sensible move, provided that this body concentrates on actually running the party as an organisation. A 250-member National Conference meeting every three years and electing a 40-member National Executive which meets annually in between, is also reasonable. The

extension to three years has already happened by default - the last full National Conference was in June 1988. In the light of the existence of factional divisions, a 40-member National Executive with some National Conference-style powers would be little different from the present National Conference of 100. The really worthwhile feature of the proposal is the expansion of National Conference to 250: at last some genuine rank-and-file party activists will get a chance to participate in top-level decision-making. As it is unlikely that a more democratic and participatory model will be adopted, the Hogg proposal deserves support because it is a significant improvement on the status quo. In considering this issue, the Left should be careful to look at the real status quo (governments either determine National Conference decisions or ignore them) rather than just what is written in the rulebook. Hopefully the combined pressures of declining membership and electoral support will generate further democratic reforms in ensuing years.

The debate at the 1991 ALP National Conference will set the scene for further debates on these vital themes throughout the remainder of the decade. Inevitably, much of it will focus on an apparently immutable status quo or a mythical and glorious past. The real value to be obtained from such a debate, however, is a serious consideration of the future which faces us all. For there can be no doubt that the next ALP National Conference will be confronted by a world radically different from the one we live in now.

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Reason and Imagination in Modern Culture

The early modern period fragmented the world of experience - and ways of conceptualising this experience - in three directions: the aesthetic, the rational and the ethical. But underlying this fragmentation is a broader and deeper division between reason and imagination. The aim of this conference is to present competing contemporary perspectives that explore this division and its impact on modern culture.

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A Thesis Eleven
Conference

Dates:

Tuesday 6th - Friday 9th August, 1991

Place:

Sir John Monash Business Centre,
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Registration:

\$90, \$45 (students, unemployed)
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