

CRISIS

management

The Labor Party is running out of members, and the members are running out of patience. ALP national secretary Bob Hogg explained to Sue McCreadie how his proposed shakeup of the party is supposed to stem the tide.

How much does the current crisis in the ALP derive from rules, procedures and structures, and how much derives from confusion about what the party stands for?

Without being flippant, there's always been confusion and divergence about what it stands for. At the end of the recent party review I do suggest that we tackle the question of the party's objective and try to get a more relevant definition about the broad objectives.

Two main strands in the party—labourism and a minority socialist element—are facing crisis after events in Eastern Europe. Is there a basis for renewal in either of these traditions?

Most Leftist parties, be they labourist, socialist or social democrat, are certainly going through a period of re-assessment or permanent decline. It's probably also true of the conservative parties. It's a bit hard to identify things in what appears to be a historic shift. There does seem to be a reshaping of the political spectrum.

How do you define the fundamental differences between the Labor Party and the coalition parties,

given the perception of some that the ground between the parties has diminished?

Part of the reason that our own people think the parties are moving closer together is due to the fact that expectations are raised in the party that are unreal within our political system, within the parliamentary and constitutional framework. People are inclined to think of the task of defining an objective as too difficult, and they see ours as reflecting a romantic view of the world from the 1920s. Not defining the objectives makes it harder to operate. From time to time it may be more convenient to have a statement that means all things to all people, but not having a realistic definition detracts from the work that you're doing.

The reforms are aimed at trying to create a more participatory framework. It doesn't mean that you can drive people into taking up what's available, you can only structurally create a more open and effective organisation where more people are involved. There is a connection between the organisational framework and political activity and political opportunity. Another aspect is that to remain a broad-based party we have to improve the internal political education and dialogue, as well as the exchange of views and argument, so that you don't end up by taking the easy way out and adopting policies or positions which really are not practical or possible. In other words, false

expectations can be raised and when you get into government the process of disillusionment starts very rapidly. That's not to say that there are not decisions of the federal government, or state governments for that matter, that justify the upset in the rank and file of the party, or that appear to have scant regard for underlying principles, as against detailed policy. But in general I don't believe the government does this, and I don't believe in the tweedledum-tweedledee thesis. You've only got to look at the attitude to workplace issues and industrial relations, to questions of discrimination and social justice.

Part of the problem we've had at a national level is that the opposition's been a shambles for so long, never really having a clearly defined position, and that's made the differences hard to identify with precision. Howard was starting to shift to a nostalgia for a vision of the 50s which never really existed, with white picket fences and 'traditional families'—a vision which excluded people like single mothers. That posed some sharp differences. But the Liberals didn't go very far with that regressive throwback approach to policy. When Peacock knocked Howard off they went back to not knowing where they were on anything. There was no one line of policy observable in the Liberal Party. With Hewson a clearer line is now beginning to develop, and some very real differences are emerging.

You mentioned the romantic expectations of party members. There's still a perception, rightly or wrongly, that the party in government has betrayed 'traditional Labor values'—although it's not always clear what they are. On the one hand the modernisers in the party might say that the rank-and-file reaction to privatisation, for instance, has been somewhat over the top. But things like the public ownership of the Commonwealth Bank are enormously potent symbols to a lot of party members. Has the leadership underestimated the potency of those symbols in trying to deal in a more rational policy-orientated framework?

No doubt there's been a number of what you call symbols that have been removed or changed, and it's absolutely understandable that that causes heartburn and disaffection to some extent. The issue was not talked out well in advance of any change occurring, or even when it was raised hypothetically. From my perspective the net result for the Commonwealth Bank will be beneficial, but there's no doubt that some people, particularly older members of the party, were upset. Sometimes you have no option about how you work politically. The federal government had a real problem with the State Bank of Victoria. It's arguable that there were other ways of funding it, but I think the way we've gone about it means the Commonwealth Bank is more substantial and I don't think the change will affect the public control overall.

Returning to internal structures, part of the problem with the factions is that as they become "more efficient" the broad dialogue in the rest of the party is reduced further. The state conferences, and the national conference to a certain extent, reflect the results of committee work and backdoor negotiations over issues, pre-selections or



Graphic: Roboo Fazzari

whatever. The factions themselves on the surface may appear to be democratic: you can have a Left meeting of 200 people and they reach a decision, but it leaves another 12,000 out there trying to work out what the hell's going on. The less dialogue you have in a political party, the less education goes on and the less of a feeling that the rank and file are part and parcel of the decision-making process. The structural changes are aimed at increasing the capacity for people to participate and at making it harder for the factions to operate in a closed, narrow environment.

I want to ask about some of the specific proposals. Changing union composition at state conferences has received a lot of publicity. Do you see that as symbolic because it would remove the union "veto"? Why is it so important?

There isn't a union veto in that they don't act as a monolith. It's one of a series of recommendations to make the party more participatory. Removing the proposal wouldn't terminally damage other aspects of the report, but in my view it's an important ingredient. Secondly, to go from a feeling of union domination to one of partnership is psychologically important to the party. Thirdly, it is a change which is not in fact an insult to the unions nor is it telling them that they're not wanted. It is a reasonably substantial change, but it's not a critical one for them in terms of damaging their interests or rights or access within the movement. The fact is that union coverage of the workforce has declined over the past ten years, and the 60/40 formula, which was adopted in Victoria in 1970, applied to a different set of circumstances than what exists today. Now, if we're to stay viable as a political organisation, we have to be broadly representative in our membership, both through union affiliations and direct membership. If we can't make it up through affiliations, and that's unlikely, we have to try to balance the equation by ensuring that the membership is more broadly based and expanded, and

that it reflects the broad voting base that we have. We're closer to the need for a far broader membership base than historically we've ever had. If we don't recognise the problem we're mad.

Given that there is a social shift in party membership away from the traditional class base and that homogeneity, is one of the problems it's less of a focus in the lives of members?

The report only addresses those questions in general terms. The change in social patterns means that party life is very different, and the way people relate to the party and what they get out of it is very different. That sense of belonging and that social-club atmosphere is less pressing now because many other socialising avenues are available. We need to attract more people on a basis of political issues. The two great insults in this party are "you're attacking the unions" and "you're trying to middle-class the party", and they're being used by those who are attacking the proposals without coming up with anything better.

Anyone who had a secondary education in the 1960s was attacked for being an intellectual. When the party was based on the blue-collar workforce, before mass consumerism and broad education, the people who attended party meetings then were driven by the same motives, more or less, as those in the party now. They may not have had a formal education but they were self-educated; they read a lot and they used the unions and the party meetings to expand their knowledge through argument and debate. They were the precursors of the middle class. They tried to improve themselves and they're no different in their aspirations from people participating in political activity now, except that you no longer have to be self-educated.

Some people who join the ALP seem to focus on one or two issues. What would you say to someone who said: "Why should I get involved in the ALP if I'm interested in the environment, rather than the ACF or some other group with influence on the government"? That is, a direct route into the government and the parliamentary party rather than through the structures of the party?

There's a view that one would have more influence on the government by belonging to Greenpeace or ACF or the Wilderness Society than by being a party member. For some time there's been some grounds for that cynical approach. I think that period's gone. My view is that it's our responsibility as a party when gaining members to broaden their understanding and to get them to appreciate the broad context of policy platform and therefore priority if change is to be effected through the parliamentary system.

Ultimately you can't run a society based on a number of separate single-issue groups clamouring at the feet or minds of government and the government responding. Ultimately you end up with very bad government and the electorate will realise that. A government has to try to develop a cohesive and consistent set of programs and policies in order to keep society running in a reasonable

and fair manner. There is a realisation that a direct, single-issue route is not the way to go, and that's why there's been a change on the part of the federal government.

One potential problem that arises from your proposal to move to issue-based branches from geographic ones is that it would fragment the party by hiving people off into their interest groups. Is there a risk of that? Would you lose the cross-fertilisation of interests and a coherence of policy, ideology and analysis?

I'm recommending that the geographic branch still be the joining unit. But we have to recognise that people join parties for lots of reasons and it's up to us, within reason, to cater to their interests. In trying to develop a more participatory and integrated party organisation I'm suggesting a federal electorate model, where there is a collection of branches. What you do with a federal electorate is set up policy committees. They don't take fees and they don't sign you up—that's still done in the geographic branch. These committees are needed to help develop our national platform. You can't do that by trying to service 1100 or 1200 branch units, but you can if you're dealing with 150 or so units—like federal divisions.

We have seven standing platform committees where we try to group a range of policies into baskets. So you'd have infrastructure, the economy, the public sector all together, for example. We'd encourage local policy committees to be set up shadowing those national committees and to involve anybody who wanted to take part in the debate on the development of policy. They would tap into the national platform committee, and we could respond to them and service them with discussion papers and consult with them. There could be weekend seminars and open dialogue on policy development.

We can improve the exchange and the effectiveness of political work. If a branch passes a resolution, some time ago they might have received a letter to say it was noted. At least now we do forward them on to the national platform committees for their consideration, even though those resolutions have no standing. The only ones that do have standing in the party constitution are from federal unions, state branches and federal electorates. We need to improve that. If you start to get people interested in an issue, then they have to start going to meetings where people are talking about that issue; you can see the benefits for the individuals, the party and the process.

If you look at the proposal to expand national conference to elect from federal electorates so that proportional representation prevails, you can't guarantee anything but it is more likely that as people come through that tough system of argument and debate at the local level and develop some standing and relevance among their peers, some will start to say, "well, bugger it, I think I'll stand for national conference", and you get a greater continuity between the local policy interests and what occurs at the national level. Nothing works to any formula, but it does open up an opportunity for a better flow between the branch member and the national conference.

It seems to many people who come from other areas of politics, say the women's or environmental movement, that the ALP is dominated by old-fashioned ways of working. Rigid standing orders and resolutions as the dominant means of debate seem to be ancient rituals to them. Do you see any need to question how the party works and try to bring it around to more modern ways of working?

The state branches vary but most of them are encouraging a more open and more relaxed approach. You find there are more seminars being held than previously. People are actually invited to participate rather than going through the rigid Monday night formal procedures where you have a ten minute discussion about standing orders instead of the meaning of life. If you see how national executive functions, points of order and so on doesn't exist. Most of the time we'll suspend standing orders so that whatever's being discussed can be thrashed out as thoroughly as possible. National conference is run in a pretty relaxed manner even when there's been difficult issues and certainly not in a way that cuts off contributions. Some of those old practices die hard but I think you'll find they're becoming less and less the norm.

Your report is silent on some issues that the Left feels strongly about. One is problems arising from caucus decisions being binding, and another is the election of party leadership by the membership rather than the parliamentary party. Is there any merit in looking at those areas?

People are welcome to look, but I don't agree with such things and so I didn't write them. I believe we have a good political system and the form of parliamentary government is fundamentally sound and very good. The bullshit that goes on about us trying to turn the Labor Party into the American Democratic Party is an absurd insult in this debate.

On the Gulf war Labor MPs were expected to vote in a particular way whereas the American Democrats were able to speak out.

But they have no government in the way we see it. They have enormous problems with their system. They'll never be able to change the constitution they adopted. One would hope they could change things without reaching the point of terminal collapse. I think our system takes a very good approach to running government and trying to protect the broad interests of society. It doesn't mean it's infallible or works perfectly, but as a system of government it's hard to see anything around that's better than it. Part of that is having a caucus system, and for that to remain effective the party itself must be dynamic. In the American system you can run for election without a party organisation. The Liberals are doing that a bit in NSW, and that's a worrying trend in our system because ultimately it's anti-democratic. We ought to be defending what's good and improving it rather than kicking shit out of it all the time.

In short the caucus system is how we should operate and it's important that the internal mechanisms of the party are



Many of Hogg's reforms would be unlikely to raise opposition among ALP members. The proposals that have received the least attention are ones that, if supported, could provide the long-term changes needed to provide incentive for more ALP recruits.

They include proposals for greater uniformity between the states' rules, simplified procedures for joining, incentives for recruitment, closer contact between the party's local and national structures and an expanded national conference to include more representatives directly elected from branches.

Specifically Hogg proposes:

- * The national conference be increased to 250 delegates and that the extra 150 delegates be elected directly by branches.
- * National conference should be held every three years, instead of every two.
- * National conference would delegate the power of platform (policy) change in between conferences to the national executive of 40 (elected at the conference). "The National Executive will have the powers currently available to it, together with the power to vary the platform in between conferences if and when required."
- * A national administrative committee of 15 would be elected by national conference from the 40 elected to the national executive. This committee would "oversee the administration of the party, receive reports from the national secretary and the federal parliamentary leader, determine matters affecting the party's organisation and refer recommendations to the national executive on matters affecting the general welfare of the party..."
- * In all states, the state conferences comprise 50% union representatives and 50% branch representatives (where currently the balance is 60/40).
- * The collegiate system of pre-selections apply across all states—where the voting body is 50% central (a body elected by state conference) and 50% from the candidate's local area.

Clare Curran

democratic to shore up caucus. It's integrated—the strength of one depends on the other.

With pre-selection, you suggest a collegiate system rather than a rank-and-file one. In NSW the defence of rank-and-file preselection is a very emotive issue, but in Victoria people say the collegiate system distances people from the selection process. Is it really worth going to the wall on the issue of pre-selection?

No pre-selection system on its own guarantees a good result or a bad result in the interests of the party. From time to time you can get a good result out of a bad system, and vice versa. It is critical that commonsense and good will be

allowed to operate through the process of pre-selection. That must be a condition of any system, but, notwithstanding that, you've got to encourage participation without rampant parochialism. In Victoria members in the local electorate vote and elect delegates to a panel; in Queensland each local vote stands in its own right and that's combined with a central component. That would mean that the plebiscite would survive in NSW, but its effect would be halved. With the NSW plebiscite, if you have the numbers and you are the sitting member, your inclination is not to seek new membership and regeneration, because someone may emerge one day to challenge your position and your policies, so it's in your interests, once you get there, to make those who supported you stay and those who didn't to piss off or not grow.

We had the 60% rule in Queensland, which meant that if you got 60% of local support you didn't face the collegiate system. That'll be removed because it became another inducement to drive people out—60% of 600 votes is 360 votes; 60% of 100 is 60. Where's the pressure to build? With this proposal there's still a significant participatory element, and it gives a better opportunity to combine local need and state or national needs in the pre-selection equation.

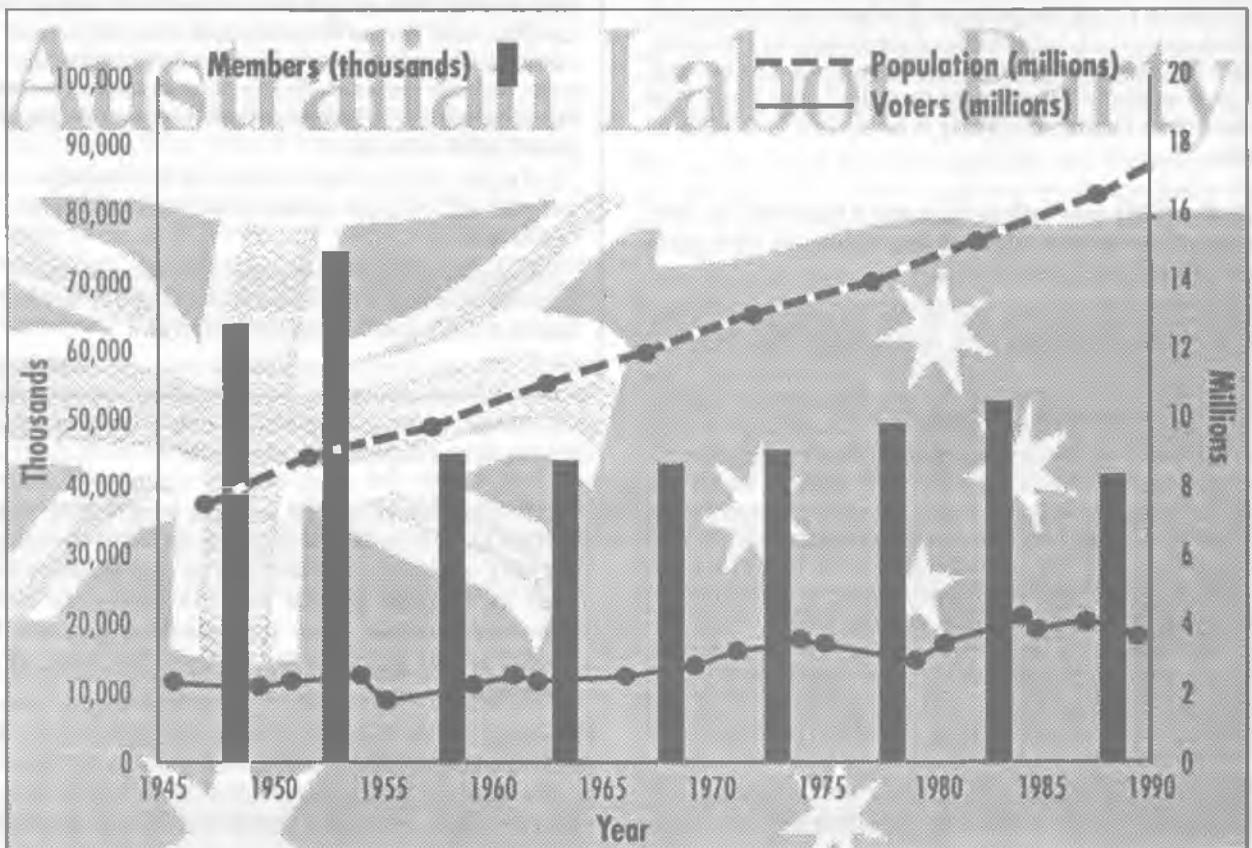
Now to the question of party-government relations. There seem to be two elements to the crisis: the unsuitability of party structures to governing, and the remoteness of the government from party membership. Having triennial conferences and allowing the national executive committee to alter the policy

platform between conferences might make the party more suitable for government but might also alienate the membership further. Are there two objectives here and are they working against each other?

We don't have to be inflexible. We may say we'll have triennial conferences but that doesn't mean that you can't have one every year if you see fit. It'll be three years in June since the last national conference, though over recent years it's usually been two years between conferences. The objective should be to develop a structure that suits all circumstances—whether in government or opposition—but the over-riding objective is to create one that's more participatory, open and accessible.

With the proposal for the new executive, the executive would be almost the size of our national conference before it was expanded in 1982. Thus the new executive is as big as what was considered highly democratic in 1982. It's also proposed that it will be elected by and from the expanded national conference. It's therefore a delegated body that will reflect the conference. It's not proposed that the executive would take executive decisions on policy matters but have powers under certain circumstances to deal with matters arising between conferences. The same people who are opposing the expansion of the conference to 100, are saying it's undemocratic and you can't allow national executive to have those powers.

On the administrative side, everyone acknowledges that the current executive is too large and so its effectiveness is



undermined. When they talk about the proposals giving more power to this office or me that's a lot of horseshit. The changes would make more work for us. Most of the administrative things I'm talking about are done at the moment without a great deal of discussion and most of the time we do the right thing. If you have an administrative/strategic campaign body, not to do the daily campaign work, but certainly the preliminary work—budgets, strategies, priorities and so on—having three tiers will improve the effective participation in the party. Those tiers are the national conference, national executive and the administrative committee.

Is all this structural reform just re-arranging the deckchairs on the *Titanic*?

In ten years' time someone will say yes, the party hit an iceberg but we didn't realise it. I don't believe that's the case; I believe there is a need for change. The nature of the party is dependent upon its organisational structure. The political activities are also dependent upon it. The structure is important, and my view is the more open and participatory it is, the healthier it is.



FAITH NO MORE

It's my party, and I'll cry if I want to...Clare Curran looks at the malaise of the ALP and Bob Hogg's prospects of rejuvenating it.

Picture this. It's 1993. The Hawke government has again scraped back into power by the skin of its teeth. The country is in financial crisis and racked by turmoil over proposals to rationalise the public service—a radical plan based on the former New Zealand Labour government's state-owned enterprise model—to save the government millions of dollars but which will also create a new middle class of unemployed.

Labor's next national conference isn't due for another two and a half years. The ALP national executive of 40 meets and decides unilaterally that, as the country's financial crisis is so serious, the particular concerns of the public service must be sacrificed for the good of the whole country.

Andrew Scott has considerable evidence to back his claims of dwindling membership. ALP membership records and official election statistics reveal that in 1988, ALP national membership slid to below 40,000 members.

After ALP membership peaked at 75,000 in the early 1950s, it slumped dramatically after 1954, slowly recovering during the Whitlam years to another peak in 1983.

Other party sources give an even more gloomy estimate for 1991 figures, predicting tallies of less than 10,000 in NSW and Victoria, those states comprising more than 60% of total membership. It is not only the national tallies which spell disaffection and disenchantment.

Overall, the ALP is a party of professionals who make up more than a quarter of its membership while manual, sales, personal service and clerical workers are represented well below the proportion in the general population.

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The party is outraged, but powerless to demand a special national conference to debate the issues because rules revised in 1991 state the national executive has the power to change the party platform in between conferences. And the new rules made the conferences every three years instead of every two. Outrageous? Perhaps, but this grim scenario paints a disturbing picture for future Labor Party dilemmas. According to reforms proposed by ALP national secretary Bob Hogg, such a scene is possible.

But that's not all Hogg proposes. His reforms, contained in a 60-page draft report as a basis for discussion throughout the party, suggest wide-ranging organisational changes in an attempt to make Labor more relevant as a political organisation and more broadly based.

The Hogg proposals have received considerable media attention in recent weeks. Most of it has focused on the plan to decrease the unions' 60% representation at state conference to 50% and the argument for and against more