

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.*

**P**icture 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.

Clare Curran

SUE MCCREADIE is economic research officer for the TCF unions and a member of the ALR collective and a member of the ALP.

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

union involvement (and power) in the party machine. There has been little attention to the proposals that have received considerable cross-factional support. Others have created such a storm as to align Left and Right factions in NSW and Victoria.

As this article went to press, representatives from the Left and Right in NSW were meeting to discuss a combined position. This is unheard of. What has brought this situation about?

The ALP is in deep trouble. Of that there's little doubt. Labor is no longer a "party of the workers" and there's substantial evidence that it is no longer a "party of the people". Branch membership has dramatically slumped, directly threatening the party's electoral prospects. Nowadays, the ALP is made up of "middle-class professionals" while still claiming to represent a "working class" constituency.

Most party commentators agree there's a crisis. Some, like Bob Hogg, have proposed sweeping organisational reforms to the party rules in the desire to do something "now" before it's too late. Others, like Senator John Faulkner, despair that the problems are much too deep-rooted for organisational change to solve them.

Hogg also despairs the lack of party relevance to its membership and electoral base. His report notes that "From the comments and feedback we receive, from the letters we endeavour to respond to, and from the resolutions carried by party units, there is a view that the party is in crisis. Party members express difficulty in defining what the party stands for and what its purpose is. There is disillusion with aspects of government policy at both federal and state levels...there is a feeling of remoteness from the decision-making processes of the party and even more so from the decision-making of Labor governments."

But what to do about it? Andrew Scott has been researching the history of the ALP and its social base. His book *Fading Loyalties—the ALP and the Working Class* (Pluto Press) will be published in June. He maintains Hogg's reforms take several large backward steps in democratising the party, by allowing the national conference to meet only once every three years and diverting its powers over policy to a national executive several stages removed from the full party membership. He claims there is a pressing need for national conference and executive delegates, party leaders, officers and MPs to be elected in future nationally by direct ballots, rather than the "tortuously indirect mechanisms which have applied until now".

"Without such reforms, the senior party decision-makers cannot be made more accountable, and the futility felt by local ALP activists cannot be overcome."

Scott also dismisses Hogg's arguments for reducing union representation at state conferences. He argues the decisions of state conferences have only minimal impact on what Labor governments actually do, and at the more powerful national conference, union representation is already down to 30%. Scott's research shows that branch

membership (as a proportion of Labor voters) has declined by two-thirds since World War Two. Unionists, as a proportion of all wage earners, have fallen by one-quarter since the 1950s. He says the unions—affiliated and non-affiliated—are the best way for the ALP to regain touch with its traditional base which no longer participates in party branches.

NSW ALP assistant secretary Anthony Albanese claims to support many of Hogg's reforms, but maintains there is a fundamental contradiction in what Hogg proposes. While supporting an extra 150 delegates to national conference as a way of transferring accountability to the branch, he says Hogg then destroys the initiative for more democracy "by removing their power to make binding decisions". Albanese says the national Left's position is for national conference to remain the ultimate decision-making body for the party. "Otherwise they become a bunch of people who get together and get pissed every few years."

The big problem for the NSW Left is the plan to base pre-selections on the collegiate system—where a panel (selected from state conference) would have as much say as the local branch in selecting the local candidate.

But if, as Albanese claims, this is what the Right really wants from Hogg's reforms, it is not what the rank-and-file membership would wish—whatever their factional allegiance. The right to vote in pre-selections is about all they've got, and a recent cross-factional campaign in NSW has collected more than 2,000 signatures to preserve rank-and-file pre-selections.

Albanese claims the current crisis stems from the federal government's decisions on uranium mining, privatisation and defence, decisions that have undermined the party's base.

Despite basic disagreements with the Hogg proposals, Albanese says he's glad Hogg has come up with a plan for change. "I support Hogg's notion that it's better to promote change from a position of relative strength than weakness in opposition. Now is the right time to promote change. If we don't we'll be in opposition everywhere."

Lindsay Tanner, secretary of the Victorian branch of the Federated Clerks Union, and member of the Socialist Left in Victoria, was an early supporter of Hogg's reforms. Tanner claims the ALP to be the "most undemocratically structured organisation in the country with clear structural weaknesses apparent in its organisation".

He advocates broadening the size of the national conference to provide more involvement for local party activists, and creating a three-tiered structure for decision-making. He argues that, giving policy power to the national executive is merely recognising the status quo. The more important issues are to make the party more relevant to its membership on the one hand, and voters on the other.

But that will only happen if union affiliation not only survives but is strengthened. While Tanner does not sup-



port the reduction of union power at state level, he finds Hogg's 50/50 proposal irrelevant. The major issue in Hogg's reforms, he says, is the change in the pre-selection system, which is an immense improvement on the Victorian system because it gives much more responsibility back to branch members.

Tanner dismisses arguments that the party is too deeply in crisis for organisational reforms to be effective. He says Hogg should be congratulated for having the guts to admit there were real problems to address. "He's taking a gamble, not sitting there with the shutters up doing a public relations job. I support that."