

The RIGHT Stuff

The debate over the ALP's organisation and factions is in full swing. Here Robert Ray presents a view from the Right. The ALP Left still carries the legacy of cold war sectarianism, he argues. And its ideological baggage doesn't stand it in good stead.

Factional apparatchiks have a vested interest in casting all, or at least some, factional activity in an heroic light. The unpalatable truth is that factions in the ALP are grubby but necessary. On occasion a faction may adopt a position of some intellectual coherence. To everyone's relief, principle and self-interest are bound to coincide every now and again - if only on the balance of probabilities.

It would be unforgivably churlish for someone with my record in the ALP to wax sanctimoniously about the evils of factions (that is usually the preserve of allegedly 'independent' ALP parliamentarians who are themselves the beneficiaries of factional deals). I have practised factional loyalty, and I have benefited from it. What's more, I don't try to dress up something which may be tacky in ill-fitting ideological garb.

That would be like the legendary story of the ALP Senator who spent 30 years in parliament, holding many senior positions in the process. On his last day in the old place, he solemnly rose and announced that, after decades of

intensive study, he had concluded that the whole thing was a waste of time and should be abolished forthwith!

Lindsay Tanner (ALR 118) suggests current ALP factional divisions owe their origin to the battles of the cold war - communists and socialists on one side, social democrats and American-style Democrats on the other.

In fact, factions are as old as the ALP - it's just that they used to be known as the 'ins' and 'outs'. The early ALP took many of its organising principles from the union movement, including most importantly the 'winner takes all' first-past-the-post system for internal elections. (To be fair, preferential voting was unknown in parliamentary elections in those days.) You were either part of the mob who got to carve up all the spoils of office, or you were nothing.

Not surprisingly, political feeling went deep. What may seem bitter barneys to the death today would appear quite pale and lacklustre to factional operators of yesteryear. V. Gordon Childe's record of the NSW ALP in the 1916-17 conscription schism and its immediate aftermath, the classic *How Labour Governs* is considerably more bloody and

disillusioning than any blasts from currently disaffected Labor supporters could ever be.

The NSW branch underwent intervention by the ALP's federal executive on five separate occasions between 1927 and 1941 (a major cause, I suspect, for that branch placing a premium on stability and continuity in the dark days of the mid-50s). What's more, in those days the people on the losing side often ended up outside the ALP, whether by choice or by brutal expulsion.

This led in some ALP state branches to the absurd situation where 'factions' were banned, and theoretically you could be expelled merely for circulating a 'how-to-vote' ticket at a state conference. In a notorious Victorian case of the late 60s, some party members were expelled for the heinous sin of writing to other party branches without the express permission of state secretary W H Hartley. These 'high-minded' principles only applied to whoever constituted the permanent minority, of course; the majority faction effectively was the ALP, and could please itself.

Even relative pessimists like Lindsay Tanner and Stuart Macintyre (ALR 120) would surely agree that the ALP has made a massive leap forward in internal democracy over the past 20 years. The progressive implementation of proportional representation for internal ALP elections throughout the party's state branches since 1970 has changed the nature of debate within Labor profoundly and for ever.

Perhaps ironically, what has generated the bulk of faction-watching over the past decade is the remarkable openness with which modern intra-party groupings operate. To varying degrees, the three broad tendencies with the ALP - Socialist Left, Centre Left and Labor Unity/Centre Unity (often given the simplistic tag of the 'Right') - have gone national and public. Correspondingly, I believe that community understanding of the internal dynamics of the ALP has never been better, and that is a healthy thing.

It is politically as well as structurally impossible that senior public figures in the ALP, such as state or federal parliamentary leaders, will ever again be subjected to the 'faceless men' humiliation undergone by Calwell and Whitlam at the hands of the 1963 federal party administration. Moreover, parliamentary representatives play a greater role in the key internal councils of the ALP than at any time since, probably, the first decade of this century.

It is a cliché of newspaper reporting to whip up tensions, often real enough, between parliamentary caucuses and the extra-parliamentary party machine. This dichotomy dates as a regular phenomenon only from the conscription eruptions of 1916-17. For the first 25 years of the ALP, politicians were accepted as prominent players in internal party decisions; only when big chunks of various caucuses, led by the megalomaniac Hughes and the ambitious Holman, really stuffed things up on conscription, did the party decide that pollies were generally on the nose.

In addition to obsessive secrecy, another feature of old factions was often blatant sectarianism. Certainly the self-



styled Left in Victoria owed more to virulent anti-Catholicism (with a fair dash of behind-the-scenes Lodge influence) as an organising force in the late 1950s and 1960s than to any meaningful understanding of socialism (or politics in general, for that matter). Towards the end of the 60s, this preoccupation caused no little frustration to communist union officials who often had a shrewder assessment of political survival.

The ALP has a rich, colourful and largely positive history. It has many proud achievements and social advances to its credit. But we can't ignore the more negative elements in the history of its internal party administration, involving abuses of power on a par with the worst excesses of Huey Long or Mayor Daley. (The reference to American Tammany Hall merchants is deliberate. Not even the most dictatorial ALP demagogue, say Jack Lang, compares to the abuses committed in the name of 'socialist democracy' or 'democratic centralism' by stalinist and leninist parties, including their Australian offshoots.)

One of the oldest tricks of a political charlatan is the use of flowery rhetoric as a cover for the baser motive of self-aggrandisement. The issue of party participation in the election of parliamentary Labor leaders, partially implemented in recent times by the British Labour Party and seen by some in Australia (including Lindsay Tanner) as a worthwhile structural reform, was pioneered by Jack Lang in 1920s New South Wales - with disastrous effects. In the name of increased democracy, Lang's personality cult, backed by a compliant state conference, ravaged state caucus. The price of challenging Lang in the parliamentary party carried the very real risk of expulsion from the ALP.

No matter how much ideological verbiage an ALP faction may produce, reality is that it seeks to advance its position relative to other contending factions. What it then does with the command of some or all commanding heights within the party may well contribute to the Forward March

Graphic: Rocco Fazzari

of Human Progress...but will also incidentally involve the distribution of various forms of patronage.

Of course, patronage is a painful topic for those unctuous socialists who wear their hearts on their sleeves. Personally, I'm quite comfortable with it. Influencing the personnel arrangements of political administration is part of the lifeblood of politics. In practice, every faction addresses these matters as a high priority - it's just that some factions are more honest about it than others.

What generally keeps factions on the Centre and Right of the ALP a bit more on the track of broad-based politics is that they are largely motivated by a desire to see the ALP gain community credibility, and consequent electoral power. To varying degrees, they sublimate their own identities in a broader identification with the ALP as an electoral and parliamentary presence. The Left, in contrast, faces more serious internal tensions.

It is one of the most important observations about the modern ALP that members of the organised Left within the party play a pivotal role in Labor governments. From personal experience, I can vouch for the outstanding contributions made to stable and constructive politics made by my Cabinet colleagues Stewart West of the NSW Socialist Left, Nick Bolkus of the South Australian Left, and Brian Howe and Gerry Hand, both members of the Victorian Socialist Left. Any ALP faction would be pleased to have members of such capacity and ability. Other leftwing ALP members make similar contributions at different levels.

So I am not arguing that one ALP faction is any more loyal than another. The internal contradiction the Left has yet to confront is that it carries its own particular ideological luggage and shibboleths, from which other factions are relatively free. Unlike the Centre Left and Labor Unity, the Left has a dual relationship to the broader party - it is apart from the ALP as well as being of the ALP.

I would guess that most Centre and Right ALP members would be fairly prepared, or at least resigned, to accept the track record of the party over the years, ranging from the moments of glory to those of utter failure and despair. The Left, however, has a critique of the ALP past and present which is central to its own rationale. If you buy the Left, you buy a package of attitudes - variations to the package are difficult indeed to negotiate, as Bob Hogg found in 1982 over modest amendments to ALP uranium policy.

Belonging to Labor Unity does not involve a rigid adherence to any particular policy position within the ALP. On most of the classically controversial policy debates within the party, any number of permutations can be found in the ALP Centre and Right. To borrow an example from Lindsay Tanner, I have yet to meet the Socialist Left member who was pro-uranium and anti-abortion, but I do know as many members of the Right who are anti-one and pro-the other as hold the reverse position.

The discipline of attitude engendered by having certain incontrovertible articles of faith does give the Left a

strength of action denied other factions. Currently the Victorian Socialist Left is riven with disputes over its participation in certain government difficulties, yet most of the time the faction's numbers stick like glue.

The relative fundamentalism of the Left translates into organising zeal. Nevertheless, it is not unreasonable to question to what extent the Left's factional energy relates to the purported principles of the group. The use in Melbourne of some ethnic groups as expendable cannon fodder in the branches verges on the notorious. (While the Left excels in this sort of crude networking, no faction is lilywhite in this regard.)

I would suggest that the form of mild schizophrenia which underlies the Left's attitude towards the ALP raises some serious dangers for the future. The Left, more than other factions, can sustain itself solely on the drive for power within the party. Although elements are thoroughly involved in the different levels of government, a substantial stream of thought still reflects the sectarian approach of the 60s - i.e. gaining a stranglehold on the party apparatus is a worthy political goal in itself. The Victorian Central Executive administration led by Crawford-Brown-Hartley was certainly tight and clinically ruthless, and probably one of the most pointless periods of recent ALP history; in Gough Whitlam's immortal words to a Victorian branch conference, "only the impotent can afford to be pure".

If future electoral setbacks result in the defeat or isolation of prominent Left parliamentarians (let alone weakening effects on other sections of the party), I personally fear for the ALP's continued stability. Already the gloves are off in the union movement - as far as I am aware, there have been more politically-motivated union elections in the past five years than in the previous 20. Party campaign techniques and resources have been used to interfere in unions on a scale unseen since the Industrial groups controversy of the late 1940s. Again, while no group is lilywhite, the Left has led the way, concentrated the most resources and reaped the greatest benefit.

Because of the organic bonds between the union movement and the ALP, industrial realignments have a delayed but profound effect on the balance of forces within the party. Because both groupers and communists were well aware of this, the union battles of the 50s were bitter and violent - and ultimately destructive. An uneasy consensus emerged within the ALP, a sort of unspoken 'non-aggression pact' between the Victorian and NSW branches representing polar opposites, that unions were out of bounds.

That consensus clearly no longer exists - why, I'm not quite sure. Without setting out to offend some ALP readers it may in part follow divisions in the Communist Party which caused a minor influx into the ALP Left of seasoned, intelligent leftists in the mid-to-late 1980s. It may also owe something to unionist frustration over recent industrial decisions creating opportunities to capitalise on which a faction finds irresistible. It may just be that the Left is better at covert operations than other factions.

Sections of the Left are certainly skilled at having 'two bob each way'. Over the life of the Hawke federal government many prominent leftwing union officials haven't enjoyed a new enhanced status in renegotiating, redefining and reassessing the ALP-ACTU Accord, a crucial underpinning of Labor's run of success.

At the same time as this (sometimes qualified) support, a skilful destabilising of non-Left unions through simplistic campaigns and populist slogans has been directed at the restraint implicit in the Accord.

Obviously, it is difficult to talk about the Left, or any other faction for that matter, as a monolithic whole acting with one mind. The ALP is still, in many respects, a federation of state-based parties, each with a distinctive political culture of its own. Factions vary dramatically from one state to another, on top of the operational differences which may exist within any one state branch.

The bottom line, however, is that while the federal ALP has never been more stable and competent (four successive election victories deserve some respect), the trend in some state branches is not healthy. As long as Labor is in office, common incentives to work together will be strong enough to overcome most policy disputes. Beyond that, it is impossible to speculate what will happen.

One thing is certain. Unilateral factional disarmament is an illusion. I cannot comment for the Centre Left, but my understanding of opinion within Labor Unity around the states is that Left adventurism will be resisted strongly. Unlike sections of the Left, we do not believe in dominance, nor do we believe that one section of the ALP is the repository of all party wisdom and heritage.

Since becoming a Senator in 1981 and a delegate to ALP national executive in 1983, I have seen an effective system of checks and balances operate in the best interests of the party. No ALP member, nor member of the public will have been happy 100% of the time, but that's the price of government. You can be, but only a fool would want to be, 100% happy with the performance of an Opposition.

Calling on the particular tradition within Labor which revolves around mistrust of politicians may be a useful tool for one faction, but I believe it may prove to be profoundly short-sighted. In the public eye, the ALP is as good or as bad as its parliamentary representatives. Factions can assist in the smooth presentation of policies and personalities, but voters don't vote for Labor Unity, the Centre Left or the Socialist Left, just as they never flocked to the electoral appeals of the Communist Party.

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