Root and BRANCH

*In our June issue Lindsay Tanner argued for sweeping changes to Labor's structures. In August, Stuart Macintyre took issue. Here **Andrew Scott** continues the debate with a look at the changing social base of the ALP.*

I share Lindsay Tanner's sense of urgency about the need for the ALP to make big structural changes if it is to survive as a grassroots party into the 21st century. ("Labor's Turbulent Tribes, *ALR* 118.) I also agree with much of the analysis he presents. This response is an early outline of some ideas which are relevant to the debate likely to occur on Lindsay's proposals, both in his *ALR* article, and in his paper, *Democratising the Labor Party*. It focuses on his proposals for widening internal democracy within the ALP. I am still developing - and assembling detailed evidence for - these ideas as part of what I hope will be a widespread debate leading into the ALP centenary.

The big fall in the Labor Party's primary vote in the 1990 federal election has been generally interpreted as the result of a rise in support for Democrat or independent candidates over environmental issues. This interpretation also appears to underlie Lindsay Tanner's view that "the Party's analysis of the 1990 federal election results and action founded on that analysis are absolutely critical" in averting further falls in the primary Labor vote.

In my view, equal attention must be given in this analysis to the defections, to the Democrats and Liberals, of working class voters angered by the Labor government's failure to improve their economic and social position. For the last three federal elections, and in the most recent state elections in both Victoria and New South Wales, there has been a pattern whereby swings against Labor in the 'safe' electorates have often (though not always) far outstripped the swings in more marginal areas.

The time has come when, instead of being celebrated as evidence of the party's sophisticated campaigning techniques, the implications of this trend need to be soberly assessed. I believe that the disproportionate loss of voters in 'safe' seats may signify the final stages of a long-term breakdown in the party's relationship with the working class and, as such, represents a more fundamental threat than the alienation of the environmental vote.

Thirty years ago, the Labor Party attracted a high rate of participation from manual, sales and clerical workers; its trade union affiliates represented a majority of wage earners, and many members of those affiliated unions actively contributed to the party. In elections, Labor could rely on the votes of two-thirds of the blue-collar workers who, in turn, made up nearly half the workforce. In more recent times the party has attracted a much lower rate of participation from manual, sales and clerical workers, as is shown by the table overleaf, which sets the occupations of Victorian ALP members alongside those of Victorians (aged 15 and over) in general, for the census years 1961 and 1986. On the positive side, the proportion of women in the party approximately doubled between these two dates, and there was a significant increase in the number of party members from non-English speaking backgrounds. However, a disproportionately low number of these new participants were drawn from the manual jobs where migrant men and women tend to be concentrated, or from the sales, personal service and clerical jobs in which most women workers are employed.

The forums of the ALP nowadays tend often to be dominated by relatively privileged people in professional occupations. The affiliated trade unions represent less than one-quarter of all wage-earners (and this proportion is decreasing daily with the rapidity of white-collar employment growth in areas which are either non-unionised or covered by non-affiliated unions). Few members of affiliated organisations now realise - let alone support - their union's linkage to the ALP. The erosion of Labor's or-

Occupations of Victorian ALP Members and Victorians generally

(% of total)

	1961		1986	
	ALP	Vic	ALP	Vic
✱ Managers & Administrators	9	8	5	7
✱ Professionals & para-professionals	10	7	28	11
✱ Salespersons, personal service and clerical workers	8	14	9	16
✱ Tradespeople	21	12	6	9
✱ Plant & Machine operators, Drivers and Labourers	24	16	7	13
✱ Unpaid domestic workers	17)		14)	
✱ Students	1)		8)	
✱ Unemployed/not stated	0)	43	7)	44
✱ Retired	10)		16)	
✱ TOTAL	100	100	100	100

Sources: For Victorian figures, Australian Bureau of Statistics; for ALP figures, State Library of Victoria (1961), ALP Head Office (1986).

ganisational connections with the modern workforce has caused party members, including parliamentarians, to become out of touch with the needs of those workers who are now, in growing numbers, expressing at the ballot box their sense of having their needs ignored. A number of factors have, until recently, insulated the ALP from the worst effects of this emerging shake-up in Australian political loyalties. In addition to the commonly cited themes of greater party unity and a more popular leadership than the Coalition, three factors in particular have been important. The first is that the residences of working class people have become much more evenly spread through the major cities, and this has enabled a static and declining working class Labor vote in overall numbers, to generate nevertheless majorities in a greater number of electorates than ever before. In Melbourne, for instance, during the 1970s, many ALP voters in manual and routine white-collar jobs shifted out of a small cluster of northern and western suburbs and into a wide expanse of eastern and southern suburbs, and this helped to tip the scales for a Labor majority in a crucial number of marginal electorates in the 1980s.

A second factor is that there have been new sources of support for Labor from women and young people, inspired in part by the social movements for feminism, peace and the environment. Again, this support has been distributed advantageously across a wide range of electorates. Thirdly, migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds have increasingly become enrolled to vote and they and their children have, progressively over the last two decades, become much more likely to vote Labor than people from English speaking backgrounds.

The party is faced by the fact that the solid base of working class support which underpinned its efforts to go out and attract the new sources of support may itself now be crumbling. In this we risk reaching the situation in which the British Labour Party found itself in 1979: a long spell of 'consensus' government having alienated traditional supporters to the extent that the party's primary vote collapsed for more than a decade.

The outcome in Australia need not be so bad; but the prospects for a Thatcherite ascendancy will certainly be strengthened by any failure now to undertake Labor Party democratisation. The most urgent item on an agenda for real, participatory democracy - as opposed to a purely formal 'representative' democracy - must be to put the Labor Party's membership, leadership and procedures of policy formation and implementation back in touch with the key Labor Party constituencies.

Lindsay Tanner has proposed a series of rule changes which, if carried through, could largely achieve this. These include a recruitment drive for new members, new branch structures to give a greater role to issue-based and ethnic-based branches. How to overhaul local branch activity so that it is geographically in tune with the needs and lifestyles of modern working class communities, and can transmit the aspirations of those communities into the party's policy structures must rank as the key issue to be tackled in the proposed recruitment research.

More than ever before, the Labor Party in the 1990s will need to appeal to both the working class (in all its diversity of collar colour, gender and ethnic background) and to the supporters of social movements. It is wrong to pretend that the interests of these constituencies are identical or that there is no tension between their participants. There clearly is. But much of the tension is superficial.

The ALP in the 1990s will need to re-establish its original identity as a party on the side of labour, as distinct from capital; and in a manner which enables the majority of employed people to express their day-to-day needs and aspirations through the party. This challenge cannot be met without the provision of democratic structures, appropriate resources and programs of political education, and we must now strive to develop these.

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