

DECLINE *and Fall?*

In our June issue Lindsay Tanner argued that the ALP is dying as a grassroots party, and that the factions are an obstacle to its revival. Here, Stuart Macintyre enters the debate. Yes, he argues, the Labor movement is in a state of long-term decline. But focussing on its structures won't halt that process.

The cartoonist David Low used to portray the British trade unions as a draughthorse - stolid, slow-moving, not too bright, but big-hearted, faithful and awfully difficult to deflect from its purpose. Lindsay Tanner presents the Labor Party in his *ALR* article (*ALR* 118, June) as a sprawling combination of turbulent tribes led by jealous warlords, each tribe defining itself in terms of ancient vendettas and maintaining internal discipline by patronage and feudal loyalty. Common to each of these metaphors is the theme of intractability.

Both in his *ALR* article and his widely discussed proposals for 'Democratising the Labor Party', Lindsay Tanner is urging dramatic change. Anyone who can bring about change in the Federated Clerks Union is not to be taken lightly. I welcome Lindsay's courage and initiative in opening the subject up to debate, and I am in broad agreement with his political values and goals. Where I differ is over some aspects of his diagnosis and prescription. I believe he mistakes symptoms for causes and proposes a remedy that might not cure the underlying malaise.

His account of "Labor's Turbulent Tribes" (in *ALR*) locates the origins of the present factional system in the Split of the 'fifties and its Cold War ideological conflict, and traces the subsequent Balkanisation of the Labor Party across the state branches as a process with a decreasing ideological and increasing organisational dynamic. He acknowledges that the present factional system has some advantages. It enables the ALP to straddle a broad spectrum; it contains conflict within manageable limits and gives some predictability, continuity and stability.

But his disadvantages of factionalism outweigh the advantages. By concentrating power in the factions, it forces party members to commit themselves to a party-within-a-party in a way that ties them to a comprehensive but arbitrary set of policy alignments. Even then they are excluded from access to decision making because factionalism cements collegiate procedures and encourages deals that circumvent these procedures. The factions, he suggests, concentrate power, encourage lowest common denominator politics and hinder rational decision making.

Finally, Lindsay predicts that the factional system will not be able to withstand a momentum for change that is sweeping the political scene. The demise of



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leninist structures in both East and West, the challenge from the right to social democracy and the challenge from the social movements to conventional politics render the Cold War alignments obsolete.

To survive, he suggests, the Labor Party will need to alter dramatically its structures and political culture. In his paper on 'Democratising the Labor Party' he further

explained the urgency of the task. He interprets recent election results culminating in the federal election earlier this year as demonstrating the exhaustion of present methods. In March 1990 Labor won less than 40% of the national vote. It was returned on the preferences of Democrats, Greens and independents. This is no temporary setback: it reflects a widespread cynicism and rejection of machine politics that offer no vision. The

arrogance of leaders who manipulate public opinion makes no appeal to the young who are excited by the ideas of feminism, green politics and participatory democracy. Hence the need for sweeping rule changes including direct preselection of parliamentary candidates, open policy committees, direct election of party officers and branches formed around interests and causes rather than by locality.

Lindsay expects these changes to prise loose the grip of the factions. By expanding a direct democracy within the party, the concentration of power in the hands of faction leaders will be broken. Members will be able to join, speak, act and vote as they see fit, bypassing intermediate stages in the organisation that entrench the factional tickets and the horse-trading they permit.

Since organisational measures have primacy in his argument, I shall consider them first and then return to the question of factions.

Historically, the grounds for believing that the ALP is in an unprecedented condition of crisis are not strong. As Lindsay himself points out, Labor's primary vote fell below 40% in the 1977 federal election, just a few years before it entered its decade of electoral dominance. There have been previous periods, especially between the wars, when Labor also presided over adverse economic conditions and when its appeal shrank to similar dimensions. The electoral resilience of Labor politics is a phenomenon that even the doomsayers who, a decade ago, were pronouncing the inexorable decline of the British Labour Party are now forced to concede.

The membership of the party has suffered attrition, both in absolute numbers and as a proportion of the electorate, ever since the 'fifties (when the factional conflict of the Split had elevated it to an unprecedented height). But, again, this trend is not as stark as some would believe. The Victorian branch of the ALP peaked at 23,000 in 1953; for the past few years it has been static at about 11,000. Neither statistic suggests a mass party, for the ALP has never been a mass party on the European model. Rather, it has been a party combining affiliated trade unions with a small number of branch activities. For this reason I believe that the long-term shrinkage in the coverage of the unions is a more serious threat to the wellbeing of the Labor Party than the number of branch members.

Nor has the Labor Party historically been an open and democratic organisation in its internal procedures. Its creators had a strong commitment to the principle that the party membership could control the officers and elected representatives through such devices as the sovereignty of conference, the caucus and the pledge. But anyone familiar with labour history knows of the struggle by groups and tendencies to win control, of the branch stacking and deals, crooked preselection ballots

and autocratic state secretaries, blacklists and expulsions, the open battles between conference and caucus. The past decade has in fact been relatively free of the scandals that studded the past.

Despite these qualifications, I agree with Lindsay that there is a deep infirmity within the ALP. Paradoxically, it is a condition closely associated with the electoral success of the party during the 'eighties, and the record and methods of the present Labor governments. But it is not simply a product of these circumstances. I see it affecting not just the organisation and procedures of the party, but also the party's social base and ideology.

One of the most debilitating features of Labor in office has been its removal of decision-making from the reach of party members. This was a development that began with the federal government's early reversal of party policy on a range of foreign and domestic issues where Cabinet led and Caucus, federal executive and conference followed. Beyond that unwelcome but familiar trend of Labor in government, however, there was a new development - the concentration of decision-making in the hands of peak bodies that met privately to thrash out agreements (such as the Accord) or in the glare of the electronic media to establish a ritual consensus (like the Summit).

The government developed this style of politics in its dealings with the various parties with whom it dealt: not just the unions, big business, farmers and miners, but also migrant representatives, social welfare organisations, and so on. Just as the ACTU gained access to policy making in return for delivering its membership, so the others have been invited to do the same, with greater or lesser enthusiasm according to their perceived importance.

For the government, these social movements are necessary vexations. Necessary because they bring votes and energies that are increasingly important as Labor's membership declines. Vexations because their ideological fervour and collective procedures are so difficult to harness to conventional politics - and for this reason the government has encouraged the emergence of peak bodies that at least speak a common language. For peak bodies such as the Australian Council of Social Service or the Australian Conservation Foundation, on the other hand, the balancing act is difficult. In order to exert an influence on policy, they have to negotiate and accept the responsibilities of negotiation; in order to retain credibility among their members, and to be regarded as sufficiently important to be consulted in the first place, they need to retain some critical space.

A consequence of this style of political management is that it displaces ideological discussion from the Labor Party to the groups for whom it claims to act. The government takes on the appearance of a manager, balancing and resolving competing claims to retain its

possession of state power. Those with whom it has close relations, such as the ACTU, face corresponding difficulties when they try to mobilise enthusiasm top-down for tasks that require active participation bottom-up.

The results are apparent in the composition of ALP branch membership. The past quarter-century has seen a precipitate decline in the original base of the party, the manual wage-earners. While there has been a significant increase in the membership of women and the number of party members from non-English speaking backgrounds, few of these participants come from the manufacturing, retail and service occupations in which most of these sections of the population are employed.

Thus, the forums of the ALP nowadays tend to be dominated by people in professional occupations, and a high proportion of them work as public administrators, or providers of public sector services, or in social movements competing for the attention of Labor governments. In healthy branches this can produce a high level of involvement, especially where local government participation enhances the capacity of members to realise their concerns. It can also create the danger of capture by administrators at the expense of what are usually called their 'clients', and of single-issue enthusiasts at the expense of others. Elsewhere, activists find it more productive to expend their primary energies in the social movements themselves to the detriment of the ALP.

A further consequence is a feeling of neglect or disillusionment among wage-earners who are not directly involved in these causes and who believe that their needs are overlooked. As is now widely recognised, the neglect of the social needs of working class families pushed to the extremities of our major cities is acute.

The party leadership and its electoral strategists have responded to the erosion of the working class base of the party with highly sophisticated polling techniques to determine the priorities in the allocation of resources. At considerable cost to the level of support in older Labor electorates, they have maintained a sufficient spread of votes to retain power with the preferences of the Democrats, Greens and independents. But the limits to this technique appear to have been reached.

The appropriate metaphor for the present conjuncture might not be Lindsay Tanner's warring factions, but the later stages of the Roman Empire. As the pressure from without exerted by the Goths and Visigoths increases, the imperial generals reinforce their depleted legions with barbarian recruits and despatch them to those outlying provinces where the pressure is greatest. Gradually the defences are stretched thinner and thinner, while the generals argue among themselves and their foreign legionaries give ominous signs of mutiny. If the logic of my simile is valid, then organisational

changes alone will only delay the fall of Rome. The crucial need is for measures that will fill the bellies and fire the spirit of the citizens.

How do the changes that Lindsay proposed to the structure of the Labor Party bear on this diagnosis? I agree with him that changes to the rules need to be considered and that we need to remove impediments to party democracy. I'm not sure that the factions are the principal impediment. In their own procedures the factions are by no means undemocratic. My own Socialist Left faction in Victoria directly elects its executive. Its regular assemblies, which all may attend, determine factional policy and draw impressive numbers. Possibly the factions are surrogate forums for the democratic life that needs to flourish in the branches. Possibly they are seedbeds for its regeneration.

I certainly agree that we need more direct election of party officers and more direct decision making. I'm not convinced that direct preselection of parliamentary candidates would weaken the influence of the factions - the role of factions in New South Wales, where this occurs, is hardly less marked than in Victoria, where there is a collegiate system. Nor am I optimistic that a change from neighbourhood branches to branches based on interests and identity would in itself promote a more vital and coherent party membership.

The crucial need seems to me to be renewal of the core principles of the ALP. For the best part of a century the Labor Party has defined itself on the primacy of class. It mobilised wage-earners and their dependants into a political movement for the achievement of working class aims by a mixture of state regulation and state provision. Historically, the labour movement has sought to broaden its political base and encompass other aspirations - the desire for peace, the improvement of the lot of disadvantaged minorities, and the removal of the disabilities of women and Aborigines, are just some of these. In practice, its record has been far from uniformly progressive. In principle it has maintained a commitment to emancipation and solidarity.

It is manifest that this broad ideological tradition that spans a spectrum from labourism to socialism is in urgent need of revision. Few of the core assumptions remain unshaken by the predicaments of the present. But if the Labor Party is to retain coherence it needs a holistic ideology that can incorporate the needs and aims of those who presently cluster around it. That in turn requires some more solid basis than this or that faction making a bid for the support of this or that social movement. It requires a fundamental revitalisation of the politics of the Labor Party on the basis of principle rather than expediency.

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