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ALP's viability as a major political
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In April 1990 I wrote that
"Australian politics...may be about
to undergo quite dramatic struc-
tural change, with political forces
outside the ALP and coalition par-
ties taking seats in lower houses
and exercising real political
power". I argued that there was a
growing electoral trend towards
progressive non-ALP candidates
which seriously threatened the
ALP's viability as a major political
party.

At first glance, the tremendous vic-
tory of Phil Cleary in the Wills by-
election in April is a dramatic
reaffirmation of this claim. But is this
really the case? Closer inspection
reveals that the Wills outcome
should be treated with a good deal
of caution. It certainly confirms the
strong trend towards independent
candidates, but should not be seen
necessarily as the first in a wave of
seats to fall to such candidates.

The fact that this was a by-election is
obviously important. Phil Cleary
received a level of media attention,
including extended television ap-
pearances, which no candidate
receives in a general election. The
spectre of hung parliaments and in-
stability caused by independents
holding the balance of power (a
potent factor in Tasmania in 1992 and
probably in the recent British elec-
tions) was absent. The limited time
available for preselection and cam-
paigning meant that the natural ad-

The role of unemployment in the
election has been a fraction inflated.
It was obviously a dominant theme
in all major candidates' campaigns,
but I doubt very much whether by
itself it was a dominant determinant
of voter behaviour. If the ALP simply
shrugs its shoulders and writes off
the result as a response to very high
regional unemployment, it will be
making a very serious mistake: un-
employment was part of a broader
patchwork of issues.

In fact, the vote for Phil Cleary was a
rejection of almost everything the
ALP now seems to stand for. In par-
ticular, it was a rejection of the
party's recently acquired born-to-
rule mentality. It was a rejection of
arrogance; a rejection of smart
operators adept at electoral
manipulation but light on substance;
a rejection not only of 'economic
rationalism' but also of the
managerial/technocratic mentality
which allows contemporary Labor to
embrace that alien philosophy. It is
not so much specific Labor policies
that have alienated the electorate; it
is a general sense of what Labor has
become. Phil Cleary won because he
was 'one of us', a fighter who stood
for something, and a down-to-earth
character light years removed from
the slick real estate agent parody that
is all too common in the major par-
ties.

Twice this year—in Tasmania and
Wills—the ALP has polled less than
30% of the vote in areas where it has
traditionally dominated. Although
there are many unusual features in
Phil Cleary's win unlikely to be
reflected elsewhere, it is sobering to
reflect that Cleary didn't just win: he
bolted home by the length of the
straight. He could have handed back
6 or 7% of his 34% to Labor and still
won.Despite the tentative signs of
movement away from the appalling
Labor culture of the 80s, which are
inherent in One Nation, and Paul
Keating's forays into republicanism,
the ALP remains in a very precarious
position.

LINDSAY TANNER is Victorian
secretary of the Federated Clerks Union.