COMING TO THE PARTY

Britain's Labour Party is undergoing a crisis of identity very similar to that of the ALP. Dennis Glover compares the experiences with the Australian debate conducted in ALR.

The ongoing debate in ALR on the factional, structural and policy directions of the ALP in many ways mirrors that occurring in the British Labour Party which has been inching its way to an historic structural overhaul. The ascendant sections of the party, from both the Right and Left, unions, parliamentary and constituency sections, believe that the notion of a union-dominated socialist party is an unpopular anachronism. The future, they believe, lies in the social democratic model predominant in Europe. Here, I want to approach briefly the Australian debate in the light of the British experience—which provides some thoughts on how Australian Labor could make itself more responsive to the social forces of the 90s and thereby give a more radical platform greater legitimacy in the eyes of the electorate.

Labor in the 90s has to appeal not only to those who identify as unionists or interest group supporters, but also those who wish as individuals to live in a more democratic society—people who support demands for a more liberal, equal and sustainable society but who oppose the corporatism and democratic compromises that they perceive Labor currently implies. These are the people who are currently attracted to the Australian Democrats and to the Liberal Democrats in Britain.

The current changes in the structure of the British Labour Party attempt to address these issues. They are designed to transform it from a traditional trade union dominated democratic socialist (its critics say "labourist") Labour Party into a European-style social democratic (its critics argue American-style Democratic) party.

Power within major parties, the electorates have judged, must be taken away from groups whose entrenched position militates against proposals for reform and instead be given to those who represent the emerging new social forces. These new structures must conform to society's notions of what now constitutes democratic decision-making.

The British Labour Party's current structure derives from its origins as the parliamentary voice of the trade union movement, and power within the party still rests largely with the unions. There is a growing consensus within the party that this should now change, as social changes make the union dominated 'Labour' parties less appropriate and less appealing to a constituency which increasingly identifies itself according to factors other than union membership eg, gender, as consumers, as environmentalists and so on.

In line with this changing emphasis, the leadership of the party is currently pushing for the adoption of a one member, one vote system of preselection. This would replace the current system whereby locally affiliated unions and socialist societies get a substantial bloc vote on the preselection panels in each constituency.

At the same time, policy making is being transformed in two ways. First, a thorough Policy Review has just been carried out, following the highly publicised 'Labour Listens' campaign which was designed to rid the public of the image of the Leader taking orders from the unions and militant party members.

Secondly, proposals will be put to the next conference to set up a 170-strong National Policy Forum which will sit all year round, continually reviewing policy and submitting a platform to the conference which can be amended from the floor.
How should one interpret these changes taking place in British Labour? Could they provide an example for those trying to democratise the ALP? It depends on your level of cynicism.

The cynical approach, adopted by Labour’s ‘hard Left’ (symbolised by Tony Benn), sees the current proposals as creating a National Policy Forum which will be easier to control than the party conference, and will turn conference, supposedly the supreme expression of democracy in the party, into a rubber stamp of the leadership and a pathetic carnival—much like the US Democratic Convention. There is, indeed, a good deal to commend this line of reasoning. The reform proposal documents are not shy in stating the importance of the party conference to the electoral image and the need to keep the opinion polls in mind each October.

However, the Bennite hard Left should be the first to realise the weaknesses of the current policy-making structure. In 1974 the third Wilson government was elected with a policy manifesto largely written by Benn himself which stressed the need for sweeping public control, ownership and democratisation of industry. However, within a short period of time Prime Minister Wilson had shunted him sideways into the Department of Energy and effectively shelved the party program. Members of the ALP need no lessons on how easy it is for Cabinet not only to ignore but contradict totally policy that is formulated by one-off ‘binding’ party conferences.

A less cynical approach would be to look at the inadequacies of policy-making in both the Labour Party and the ALP. Policy, it is argued, is often hastily thrown together, not fully thought out in terms of the practicalities of financing and implementation, and motions passed often represent face-saving compromises full of internal contradictions or attempts to shelve debate on a politically damaging area without really resolving the issue.

Labour’s national platform committees face enormous pressure from factional leaders and cabinet members to produce suitably bland and moderate policy. Debates at conference become largely meaningless because the outcome is already known. In fact, rather than being an expression of party democracy, conference degenerates into a forum for the leadership to affirm their right to ignore its decisions and to implement policy emanating largely from the business community and the press.

We must come to grips with the fact that leaders will always reserve the right to ignore party policy. This is because, whether party members like it or not, the community palpably does not accept the principle that parties have a veto over the decisions of elected legislators and governors. In their eyes, party policy does not have the requisite amount of democratic legitimacy to bind parliaments and governments. How do we give it greater legitimacy? This is the question which must be addressed by members of reforming parties who feel outraged by their governments’ continual records of ‘betrayal’. Some answers can be found in the British Labour Party’s proposed reforms. Others require us to go beyond those measures to explore new ways of merging the ALP more closely with the progressive elements in the community.

Firstly, policy must be aimed primarily at solving the problems at hand and not just at reconciling factional differences. We should seek to move towards the structures of European social democratic parties where policy is made on an ongoing basis by large elected standing committees or forums and ratified, amended or rejected by full party conferences.

A second measure that should be investigated, and which goes further than those proposed for the British Labour Party, is calling for large scale community involvement in the policy making process. The community feels hostile to the decisions of parties as opposed to those of governments partly because it rightly perceives that it has no input into these decisions which directly affect their lives if implemented.

Another possible measure and this will probably be rejected outright by many members is the inclusion of non-party members on the party policy committees.

The reasons for opposition to this idea are obvious. It seems, on the face of it, undemocratic. But, of course, party policy is already heavily influenced by non-party sources—mostly conservative ones. It’s obvious that the leadership at national conference is far more concerned with the opinions of the journalists, media entrepreneurs and financial markets than with the internal opposition within the party. The growing influence of hired electoral, marketing and advertising consultants is also manifest. Given that not all environmental, welfare, media, economics and other experts are interested in membership of a political party, we should think of ways of involving them, taking advantage of their specialised knowledge and reaching out to large groups of people not yet directly involved in the political process. Their influence can be prevented from becoming excessive; they would remain invited allies, helping the ALP harness support from areas which should be the natural territory.

On a more philosophical level, perhaps it’s time for the ALP, as for British Labour, to get away from the vanguardist notion of a political party. Internal party democratisation is important but is not enough. A total lack of internal party democracy certainly hasn’t hindered the British Conservatives in winning successive elections and implementing a radical reform program. We should, as a social democratic or democratic socialist guiding principle, be looking to involve the whole community in the political process, in democratising society at large. Events in Eastern Europe have proved that socialism or social democracy is doomed unless this occurs.

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