In our April issue, Bob Hogg put the case for an organisational revolution in the ALP. Here Bob McMullan responds with a view from outside the factions.

It is entirely appropriate that Bob Hogg and other interested party members should be initiating a fundamental review of the Labor Party structure in this centenary year. I support the need for such a review and welcome an opportunity to make a contribution on the its priorities.

We need to put the 'crisis' in the Labor Party into perspective. The party is at the end of its most successful decade in a 100-year history. It is true that being in government imposes great stresses on a party and these have reverberated in the ALP from the highest level to the newest member. But this is much more welcome than the problems of atrophy in opposition with which we had become too familiar.

Seen from this perspective, the party's structure, which ALP members are seeking to reform, has been remarkably successful; indeed, the most successful structure in the history of the Labor Party and the most successful social democratic structure in any country outside Scandinavia during the 1980s. This is a reminder and a plea to others not to rewrite history by turning the current serious circumstances into a crisis created by flaws inherent in the structure of the party. This is not to deny that as society changes so the Labor Party must change and adapt.

For any political party, structure and organisation are not ends in themselves. They should be assessed against the party's objectives. The long-term objectives of any party of social reform can be expressed in two parts: (i) to gain and retain power (ii) for the purpose of implementing social reforms in accordance with the platform of the party.

It follows logically from this that the Labor Party needs the capacity to rejuvenate itself in office. The last thing I want to suggest is that a period in opposition would in some way enhance the party or improve its capacity to cope with the demands of the 21st century.

In analysing the priorities for change we should look firstly at the fundamentals of the political process within which the Labor Party seeks to operate. A reform party in a democracy needs always to remember that the political process is ultimately about the struggle of ideas. In the long term, reform politics is only possible in an environment where there is broad-based community support reform. It can't be imposed from above if it is to have an enduring impact. The implication of this is that we need a Labor Party that is open to the maximum input of ideas and viewpoints. Therefore, people must be able to join the party easily and, having joined, find it easy to participate and contribute effectively.

In many parts of Australia it is hard to imagine how the party could make joining more difficult. So many resources are put into keeping out the odd one or two 'undesirables' that the ALP turns away, or fails to encourage, scores of potentially constructive members. A membership process that is simple and open should be the first priority of reform. It is only through such an open process that a wealth of ideas for future policy development will be available. After all, the Labor Party is not a debating society; winning arguments (or numbers) inside the party is not the purpose. The purpose is, rather, to see the result of the internal debates implemented as successful and enduring government policy.

The ALP has always prided itself on being a democracy but it has tended to be obsessed with structures at the expense of underlying values. Having encouraged people to join the Labor Party, it is important that the structures enable a diversity of views to be expressed and dissenting views to be tolerated.

Beyond this is the question of making the contribution of members effective. This problem has been summarised in the phrase "loss of ownership". In other words, many members feel that they no longer play the significant role in the party which they once did. Whether Labor ever was a party truly owned by rank-and-file members is another question.

But it is essential that anyone who chooses to join the party perceives a special relationship with those in positions
responsibility, a relationship not available to those outside the party. First and foremost this entails enhanced communication. Party members need alternative sources of information and regular detailed explanation of what has been done, why it has been done, and what is proposed to be done in the future. Members also need to be able to respond, to indicate what they believe the priorities should be and what contribution they can make.

Secondly, I have advocated for some time the development of what I call “open forums”. By this I mean a report-back process at numerous and geographically dispersed meetings open only to Labor Party members. I don’t envisage these meetings as decision-making bodies. The purpose, as I see it, is to encourage genuine dialogue and to give members the opportunity to hear an explanation from ministers of the party’s recent program and an indication of where it fits in a longer-term program of reform. The final outcome is the exchange of ideas itself, not number-crunching.

A third issue is the development of a “clever” party. Over the last 20 or 30 years at least, the ALP has paid insufficient attention to the education and training of members and to their role in modern campaigning. As campaigning has changed, some of the older, more traditional functions have been reduced in significance. However, modern campaigning also requires people, even though their functions may be different. There tends to be a fascination with the high technology which can be applied to these tasks but it needs to be remembered that neither the objective nor the nature of campaigning has changed.

I should comment on the particular significance of factions in this process of reform. It is important, if true, to recognise that factions are inevitable. In every significant organisation there will be people with divergent views about the role and the priorities for that organisation. Anybody worth their salt will seek to organise to ensure that their priorities and views are those which the party, organisation or nation adopts. This is not only inevitable, it is healthy. But there are two fundamental questions which need to be addressed. One is the increasing tendency for factional rigidity. My concern is that there is no potential for lasting reform in rigidity and ossification, only in diversity and open debate. If the secret of success is seen as never deviating from the factional line, then we will find conformity rewarded and originality penalised. That may be an acceptable criterion for selection in a conservative party (though I doubt it) but it is the deathknell of reform politics.

The second trend which causes concern is the all-too-common tendency to put faction before party. These two problems are exacerbated by the fact that, although factions dominate the leadership positions in our party at an administrative level, if not always at parliamentary level, they do not represent the majority of members. There are more party members who are not in factions than who are.

The current debate surrounding the review of rules has highlighted one key factor about factions: it has shown that the key divisions are not about ideology but about power. The debate about party reform is between in-factions and out-factions, not Left, Right and Centre. It is absurd that rank-and-file preselection can be a Left policy in Albury but not in Wodonga; that the collegiate system can be Left policy in Canberra, but not in Queanbeyan. It is more than coincidence that the greatest resistance to change comes from present office-holders in all states.

In this context the question of reducing the direct union representation at party state conferences from 60% to 50% will make no significant difference to the factional balance in any state. But the logical starting point for any discussion should be that all partnerships start from the presumption of equality, rather than defence of the status quo. The onus should be on those wishing to argue that the partnership between branches and unions should be other than equal to establish their case. The 60/40 ratio is a historical accident. To defend it on the grounds of damaging the status quo is as classical a conservative argument as Walpole or Menzies could ever have devised.

In a balanced party which encourages diversity and tolerance I believe the 50/50 balance is the appropriate preselection rule. If the union/party balance is not changed to 50/50 I suspect that more harm than good may be done by uniform application of the principle of equal partnership at the preselection level. Whatever system is to operate, it is important that there is some broad principle which enables the National Executive or some similar body to oversee the rules and their application to ensure that preselections are as fair as possible.

Individual members should be given a role in the election of a number of delegates to the National Conference, thereby reducing the capacity of powerful individuals and groups to determine the outcome of conferences in back-room deals.

Simply changing the ALP in order to perpetuate old myths is not reform. The Labor Party has never been a mass party; there have been very few times in its history at which it has had more members per capita of population than it has now. If we are going to bring about sensible change we have to proceed on the basis of reality, not myth.

If we start from the principle that we want to develop a party which is geared to gain and retain office to ensure enduring social reform and that we want a party capable of debating key ideas and concepts in the modern high technology society, then the questions of organisational reform will follow logically.

I congratulate Bob Hogg and the others who have initiated this process of reform. It will be a fitting outcome for our centenary year if historians are able to look back and see 1991 as a year in which change to regenerate the party was made while it was in office and that that change served as the basis for an enduring and reforming government.

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