What ALP?

I have followed with great interest the debates in these pages about the Labor Party and its policies. It may seem naive of me, but the question I always find myself asking is not what the ALP should do about privatisation and branch structure; it is whether the ALP actually exists.

It may seem obvious that the Labor Party exists. After all, one can see its spokesmen - even the occasional spokeswoman - on the telly practically every night. There is always a face, a name, a voice, a line and a personality to impress upon us, via the screen or the radio, the presence of the party. The party has become institutionalised in the language and style of the media.

This is no guarantee that the party really exists. These are times in which more money gets spent on a television show called Miami Vice than on the police force in that city which it mythically represents. Hence one is entitled to ask whether more effort is being put into creating a simulacrum of the Labor Party on television than into actually building and running a political party which represents, educates and mediates its constituency, and which translates that constituency’s needs, values, aspirations and symbols into political power.

The Labor Party traditionally existed in Australian cultural life as a local thing, organised territorially, neighbourhood by neighbourhood. This branch structure still exists, but it so endangered a part of our political heritage that it might as well be classified for preservation by the National Trust. The motor car and the television have made it redundant as a cultural and social institution, reducing it to a tedious organ of factional manipulation. Localities no longer function as integrated social and cultural units. Hence the branches cannot really have any but a residual effect on the cultural and social life of the country other than as an AA for compulsive rotters - political junkies anonymous.

As traditional class and locality allegiances in politics break down, the failure of the ALP to develop cultural and social means of cementing people together around a social democratic policy consensus and worldview might prove disastrous. Take the slow decline of the American Democrats, who have been stomped on by a Right more willing and able to use contemporary cultural and media strategies to cement together a Right-wing hegemonic force and gain popular consent for it (as Larry Grossberg argued in the last ALR). The complacency of Australian Labor in the face of such lessons is a worrying thing.

Modernising the ALP seems to have meant spending vast amounts of money on opinion polling, public relations, media ‘handlers’ and huge TV advertising campaigns. All these things are necessary, but they form a purely reactive media politics which tailors itself to public opinion as it already exists and does little to actively create a social democratic culture. Labor has done nothing at all for the broad strata of culture and media workers who support it, so perhaps there isn’t any goodwill out there for Labor to draw on even if it had the imagination to start drawing up a communication, education and cultural policy. Let’s hope the ALP doesn’t find itself in the position of British Labour of suddenly realising how important these things are - while spending a decade in opposition.

While reform of the party machine itself might be a wonderful thing, its importance for the public at large is greatly exaggerated by insiders. No amount of democratisation will make the tedious business of vetting and rounding up the numbers into a popular pursuit for the masses. Democratising the structure might make the party more fun for the avid political junkies within it and on its fringes, but for most Australians the ALP will continue to exist as the Bob and Paul show and a bunch of TV ads in election year.

Given how tedious those ads are, it’s a wonder we even bother to vote the buggers back in, but is there any choice? The tory parties ceased to exist a long time ago and are now completely simulated. The Liberals are now the shortest distance between the big companies’ cheque books and their advertising agency. The Nationals have replaced Paul Hogan as the nation’s premier stand-up comedy routine. One ends up voting Labor by default, casting our lot with it out of nostalgia for the days when political parties still existed.

Unless a more creative interventionism in cultural life is practised by the party and the movement, the very possibility of using the ALP as a political vehicle might disappear. Without a viable social democratic culture there is nothing to check this tendency. The rise of the green vote and the Democrats is surely evidence that many voters doubt the existence of the Labor Party. The average TV viewer is not stupid, after all. She or he knows that Miami Vice is not a realistic version of police life. And they know the ALP they see on TV is not a political party.

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