

Labor's TURBULENT Tribes

Labor's factions now dominate party decision-making. They also often serve to stifle rather than promote debate. Lindsay Tanner argues that if Labor is to survive as a mass party it needs to break the factional grip.

Highly structured and organised factions first emerged in the Labor Party in the wake of the 1955-57 DLP split. Since that time the development of factional structures throughout the Labor Party nationally has been dominated by similarly cataclysmic events such as federal intervention in state branches and major changes to national ALP rules.

The split produced an organised Left faction in the New South Wales branch, an inevitable response to the fact that the bulk of the forces which left the Labor Party in other states did not do so in New South Wales. The split also produced dominant anti-Grouper factions in Victoria and Queensland, although these groups were much more informal in their structures and activities. And, finally, the split helped to entrench even less formally organised dominant groupings within the ALP in smaller states such as South Australia, where key anti-Grouper forces like the Australian Workers Union became the focus of party organisation.

Federal intervention into the Victorian and New South Wales branches in 1970-71, and the introduction of propor-

tional representation in internal party ballots, brought about a factional framework in Victoria which still prevails, and legitimised and entrenched existing groupings in New South Wales. Federal intervention into the Queensland branch ten years later produced a similar result: a loosely defined but tightly controlled dominant group, the Old Guard, was supplemented by several formally-structured factions. Changes to national ALP rules and the rightwing push to secure the leadership of the Labor Party for Bob Hawke led to the development of formal factions in smaller branches such as South Australia and Western Australia where artificial consensus politics and informal influence networks had previously prevailed.

Although the form of Labor factions is very much dictated by existing circumstances within the party, particularly party rules and structures, their substance inevitably reflects events and issues external to the party. In the 'fifties the ALP became a Cold War battlefield: factions emerged essentially as proxies for the National Civic Council/United States and the Communist Party/Soviet Union. The factional landscape within the ALP is still heavily influenced by Cold War dynamics, particularly among older factional operatives.



Graphic: Ward O'Neill

The other crucial external factor which has reshaped the internal topography of the ALP is the rapid decline of blue-collar workers as a percentage of the workforce, the continuing increase in white-collar and professional employment, and the growth of female participation in employment. This structural change in the economy has been the major factor behind the emergence of the Centre Left, complemented by the decline of the Cold War as a central factor influencing political choices in the labour movement. Other related changes in the economy - in particular improvements in transport and communica-

tions and education - have helped to make the factions more national in character and structure and a great deal more uniform from state to state.

ALP factions in 1990 have their own constitutions, full-time organisers, membership fees, policies and fund-raising activities. Trade unions affiliated with the ALP are usually also affiliated with one of the party's factions. Factions have leaders who even make occasional public statements on behalf of their groupings. Key ALP decisions such as parliamentary pre-selections and the selection of cabinet ministers are now conducted through negotiations

between factional representatives, particularly at the national level and in the larger states. It is now almost impossible to play a key role in Labor affairs without being a member of or very closely linked to one of the three major factions.

The factional system has many advantages for the Labor Party. It maximises Labor's ability to straddle an extremely diverse range of ideological tendencies and interests, and channel many disparate forces into a relatively united electoral and political effort. It ensures that the struggle for power and position within the party is governed by at least some forces of stability and certainty, and that it does not degenerate into total chaos or complete horse-trading founded on lowest common denominator factors. It provides a decision-making framework which ensures that crises in party affairs can be confronted in a relatively organised and sophisticated way, with some capacity to avoid open internal warfare and outright panic. Factions provide a framework within the Labor Party which allows internal conflict to be managed with some reference to the interests of the party, and with a degree of continuity of interest and ideology which imposes significant restraints upon the often atavistic tendencies of those involved in Labor politics.

Perhaps the most beneficial feature of highly organised factional structures within the ALP is that they provide ALP members, supporters and affiliated unions with a reasonable framework of ideological choice. Members voting in internal party ballots have a pretty reasonable idea of what a Socialist Left candidate stands for, even if they have never met or even heard of the candidate. The presence of factions based at least nominally on ideological and policy differences ensures that such differences predominate in internal party decision-making. The extent to which candidates are supported for their actual policies is far greater than under other regimes, such as patronage machines and influence networks which were the norm in some of the smaller ALP branches until relatively recently.

Needless to say, however, the disadvantages of the present ALP factional system are quite numerous. Individuals seeking to exercise power and influence in Labor politics are virtually forced to join two parties instead of one, the one within the other, and reshape their views to fit in with the prevailing line within the faction they join. Individual ALP members who, like a very large proportion of the Australian community, are leftwing on some issues and rightwing on others, are obliged to modify their position on issues for reasons which have nothing to do with any intellectual appraisal or rethinking. If you're anti-uranium and anti-abortion, you've got a big problem fitting within the ALP as it exists at present.

Labor factions also function to exclude ordinary party members from genuine access to decision-making processes within the party. There is growing anger among the rank and file of the Victorian ALP at the recent prevalence of factional deals on state and federal pre-selections which ensure that the wishes of non-factional party members are irrelevant. If the factions have 60% of branch member support in a particular electorate and a deal is done which

directs that support to a particular candidate, the remaining 40% get no say whatsoever.

In effect, factions operate to import further levels of decision-making into a party whose decision-making structures are already far too collegiate. Pre-selection candidates have to seek and obtain support at local and central party level on two planes rather than one: the faction and the party as a whole. In one notorious instance, a candidate who secured nine primary votes in a local faction ballot became the endorsed ALP candidate for one of the safest federal seats in Australia because of the combined collegiate effect of the intertwining factional and party pre-selection structures. Preference distributions in the local faction ballot gave him a narrow victory at that level; the central executive of the faction was bound by broader political circumstances to support the local decision; and the faction had the numbers on the party pre-selection panel. Regardless of the merits of the candidate, a political structure which functions in this way can hardly be described as open and democratic. The more steps in a collegiate decision-making process, the more undemocratic it becomes as prospective candidates or positions are eliminated at each level and lose the opportunity even to be in the race in the ultimate decision-making process.

Many of the supposed advantages of the factional system are more nominal than real, or counter-balanced by mirror-image disadvantages. Factions may tend to displace the patronage dispenser and apolitical power broker at the central party level: in practice, this displacement moves them no further than the central factional level. ALP factions are really not much more than federations of local and trade union empires controlled by warlords of greatly varying ideology, capacity and commitment to goals broader than self-advancement.

Because of the manner in which these groups interact with each other, the paralysing impact of lowest common denominator politics is difficult to avoid. The ever-present needs of ongoing group interest make it extremely difficult for dominant forces within factions to make hard decisions in the interests of their faction, much less the party, because of the fear of future retribution within their faction. Policies which should be changed are not; parliamentary candidates who should be removed remain. Capable party members from other factions or sub-factions who should receive support do not because of the straitjacket effect of highly defined and structured factional groupings.

The claim that ALP factions represent genuine ideological differences is also open to dispute. The recruitment of an individual to an ALP faction is usually influenced more by tribal factors than by ideology. Union officials and activists adhere to the faction with which their union is affiliated for reasons of self-interest and tribal culture. ALP members join factions often because of geographical factors: they naturally gravitate to the dominant grouping in their local area. Inevitably, many party members decide to join the faction which offers them the greatest prospects of self-advancement. Ideology remains a powerful factor, but it tends to operate largely in a negative way: a conservative

party member will join Labor Unity because he or she is anti-Left, and vice versa. All factions have an ideological culture and, to some extent, represent a particular ideological position within the party, but this is corrupted enormously by the exigencies of power politics, patronage and feudal empire-building.

The fact that factions are parties within a party, and not separate parties, inevitably increases the power of key figures at the expense of the faction's rank and file. Because a faction does not operate as an independent political entity, its activities are dominated by its relationships with other factions. Because these relationships are conducted primarily through a small group of leading figures, the access to information and broader influence which those figures acquire through those relationships makes them even more dominant within their own groupings. Occasionally the leaderships of various factions combine to make decisions in their own interests which they then have to go and 'sell' to their respective memberships. The cross-factional decision to abandon Labor's long-standing policy of abolishing the Victorian Legislative Council taken several years ago was a classic example of this tendency.

It is very clear that the existing factional framework within the ALP is going to change considerably over the next decade. The days of the Cold War proxies have gone, and the forces in the labour movement which channelled Cold War stances into Labor factions via trade unions - the National Civic Council and the various communist parties - are dying. The international ideological battle between socialism and capitalism continues, but it is no longer a matter of stark choice as it was in the 'fifties. Both ideologies have fragmented to such an extent that the boundaries between them have dissolved into a shifting array of overlapping and conflicting distinctions. Both ideologies are struggling to come to grips with the fundamental changes flowing from the rise of feminism, environmental politics and participatory democracy in western political cultures. The fact that a key figure in the ALP Right, Senator Graham Richardson, has taken the lead within the ALP on environmental issues illustrates the fact that the newly developing central factors in progressive politics in Australia are generating divisions which cut across existing factional boundaries. Both Left and Right within the Labor Party no longer have a coherent world view or clear vision as they have been caught up in the ideological crisis of social democratic forces throughout the industrialised world.

The Thatcherite challenge to the postwar compromise between socialism and capitalism, the emergence of powerful political forces based on gender and environment, the worldwide challenge to leninist and stalinist political structures are all beginning to reshape totally the

political landscape. The factors which have determined the makeup of existing Labor factions (the Cold War) and they way they operate (rigid and obscure collegiate structures heavily permeated with leninist culture) are rapidly declining in importance. Divisions within existing Labor factions are becoming as significant as divisions between factions. The harsh left-right division within the trade union movement of twenty years ago has disintegrated and been replaced with a galaxy of inter-related groupings, overlapping allegiances and broader alliances. This change will be further accelerated by union amalgamations, and will flow through inexorably into the ALP's factional structure.

If the Labor Party is to survive as the dominant political force on the left of the spectrum in Australia it must alter dramatically its own structures and political culture: such necessities will automatically impact on Labor factions as the primary component parts of the party. The ALP will be forced to democratise internally by abandoning all collegiate voting structures and allowing party members a vote in elections for all party positions including parliamentary leadership positions.

It will be forced to take action to ensure that women are equally represented with men in all key party positions, and that other traditionally under-represented groups such as young people and those of non-English speaking backgrounds are fairly represented at all levels. It will be forced to abandon its horse-and-buggy rules and obscure and complicated structures

which enable participation and influence only for the especially powerful, articulate and aggressive. It will be forced to develop a culture of grass-roots politics, of tolerance towards other political forces, and of constructive interaction between diverse individuals and groups. The ALP will even be forced to reassess the longstanding holy writ of binding caucus decisions, probably the most powerful structural dynamic at all levels of the party and its factions. It may even have to reconsider the structure of trade union affiliation to the party.

If these changes do not happen, the Labor Party will simply wither and die, to be supplanted on the spectrum by other forces which more adequately reflect the needs and aspirations of ordinary Australians in the 'nineties. The ALP, its rules and structures, and the factions which dominate its affairs still reflect the Australian society and culture of the 'sixties. If the party and its factions fail to adapt to the mass political culture of the 'nineties very quickly, the Labor Party will move into a phase of inexorable and possibly ultimately terminal decline.

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"The ALP will be forced to abandon its horse-and-buggy rules..."