Martin Ferguson

When it became clear last year that Martin Ferguson had been anointed to succeed Simon Crean as ACTU president, one national newspaper declared breathlessly that Ferguson would be the peak union council’s first ever leftwing president.

The error was not only one of fact - Bob Hawke, despite ending up on the right of the union movement’s factional spectrum, was the Left’s candidate when he defeated the Right’s Harold Souter for the ACTU presidency in 1969. It was also one of interpretation - the Left-Right factional and ideological contests which dominated ACTU politics in the ‘fifties and ‘sixties have assumed far more importance in recent years.

The reality has been that the key Left union officials on the ACTU executive have not only supported the Accord approach but, in many cases, have provided the intellectual input and industrial muscle that has underpinned it.

Martin Ferguson’s elevation to the ACTU presidency, therefore, has little to do with the Left-Right number crunching of earlier decades. Rather, it is a signal of the growing influence of the younger generation of pragmatic Left union officials who have grown close to ACTU secretary Bill Kelty (nominally of the Centre), and of the increasingly non-factional nature of ACTU politics.

Like Simon Crean, Martin Ferguson will be a strong supporter of the Accord approach of using the union movement’s ability to influence wages policy to ‘trade’ with the Labor government to win improvements in areas which it cannot influence directly, such as taxation and the social wage. He will also push strongly the ACTU agenda of restructuring industrial awards and revitalising the union movement through a round of amalgamations, rationalisation of membership coverage, and a recruitment drive.

The essential differences between the Ferguson and the Crean presidencies, then, will be differences of style rather than of policy. Where Crean presented as a smooth economic rationalist in the modern Labor mould, and seemed more comfortable addressing opinion-makers from business and financial markets than rank-and-file unionists, Ferguson will present as a more traditional, down-to-earth union official and is more likely to criticise publicly the ACTU’s Accord partners in Canberra when differences emerge.

Ferguson’s background, too, is down-to-earth. His father, Jack, had to leave school at the age of 12 during the Depression to find work to support his family. After the war, Jack Ferguson became a full-time union official, entered politics and eventually rose to become deputy premier of NSW under Wran.

Martin Ferguson studied economics at Sydney University, completing honours in industrial relations in 1975. He was immediately recruited as a research officer by the then general secretary of the Federated Miscellaneous Workers Union, Ray Gietzelt. He became assistant general secretary of the ‘Miscos’ in 1981 and general secretary in 1984 on Ray Gietzelt’s retirement. Many of his views on issues like wages policy, industrial tactics and union amalgamations have been forged out of the influence of Gietzelt and his experiences at the FMWU.

While some of the FMWU’s members have industrial muscle, many of them are relatively weak industrially. So the union’s industrial strategies have always involved working within the arbitration system and using its strong areas to build pressure for award changes that protect workers in its weak areas. His support for union amalgamations and industry-based unions is also a product of his experience at the FMWU which Gietzelt built from a small, insignificant union in 1955 to one of Australia’s biggest by effecting more than 50 amalgamations.

In NSW, Ferguson and the FMWU have been deeply involved in the divisions which have dogged the NSW ALP Left for years and which culminated in the split in November last year over the restructuring of the Left steering committee into the Socialist Left. Ferguson lines up with the more pragmatic elements of the NSW Left, including figures like Rodney Cavalier, John Faulkner and Andrew Refshauge against the more hard-line Socialist Left grouping associated with figures like AMWU national secretary George Campbell and former NSW Attorney-General Frank Walker.

These tensions have meant that Ferguson has been a highly controversial figure in the NSW Left. But from a national perspective he will be firmly in the mould of such figures as Cliff Dolan, Charlie Fitzgibbon and, most importantly, his own mentor at the Miscos, Ray Gietzelt - the Left leader who stitched together the Left-Centre alliance that elected Bob Hawke to the ACTU presidency just over twenty years ago.

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