A Brave New World?

Bill Kelty’s grand vision to reverse the shrinking fortunes of Australian unionism is well-documented. The question now is whether the trade union movement is capable of rejuvenation, or whether, like much of its officialdom, it is reclining in its twilight years.

The survival clock is ticking, with the rate of unionisation down to 42%, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. This represents a fall of 17% since 1954, with an accelerated crash of nine percentage points during the life of the Hawke government. The ACTU itself believes the level of unionism is now less than 40%, and the doomsayers have predicted a twenty-five percent rate of unionisation by the year 2000 if the decline is not arrested.

The August ACTU Congress was the forum to relaunch the revival strategy in earnest, after a response to the 1987 Future Strategies document which Kelty sarcastically described as ‘a big yawn from the union movement’. An arresting publication, Can Unions Survive?, was distributed to Congress this year by the BWIU’s ACT secretary Peter Berry to document the crisis. It charted the collapse of unionism’s traditional manufacturing base, the boom in the service sector, and the woeful performance of unions in all growth sectors of the economy.

But curiously, and despite the statistical omens and the gloomy outlook, the Congress went off with more of a whimper than a bang. Fiery speeches by secretary Kelty and solid support from the ACTU’s left/right leadership group failed to move the masses to more than an ordnery response. If there was a shuffling of feet it seemed more in response to the hard seats and the gloomy surroundings of the Sydney Town Hall than a rippling of fear and interest.

With not a word from those, such as John Halfpenny, who had expressed opposition to the strategy outside in the corridors, and only a modicum of debate, the ACTU proposals to reshape unions into industry blocs through membership trading and amalgamations and to dramatically lift services to members, were easily carried. But it was a weary audience, and observers casting an eye over the wall-to-wall sea of ageing and mostly male trade union officials could be forgiven for asking if this were really the team to build the brave new world, to recruit the young, the women, the part-timers and the professionals.

The Congress theme, ‘Taking Trade Unionism into the 1990s’, rests on Kelty’s futuristic and ambitious agenda. The chances of it succeeding seem slim unless there is dramatic change inside the unions themselves within one or two years.

The union movement faces a conundrum. On the one hand the ACTU intends to push and provoke, to wheedle and coax the unions to reform, much as
it has taken them into the Rubik’s Cube of complex wage systems since 1987.

The unions will be confronted with propositions for internal restructuring, to change the way their own officials operate, to increase subscriptions and offer new services to members, and to introduce supportive provisions for female employees with children. Perhaps most importantly, there will be pressure on the trade union seniority system which has given the union movement a top layer of ageing senior officials which could remain in place for at least another half dozen years - perhaps the time span which will make or break the strategy.

But if the ACTU pushes too hard, it will face a backlash. Long terms in senior posts and appointments to the ACTU executive are regarded as sacrosanct at the end of long union careers: the young must bide their time.

If the revitalisation is not underway within a few short years, there is little chance of a turnaround. But there are many middle managers in the union movement who use their positions for personal political power. These will not be the movers and shakers of the new era, and by the time the next generation of unionists is able to cement its control, critical years will have been lost. In that period the growing non-union sentiment among women, the young and the part-time and casual workers in the growth sectors of the economy could be institutionalised and irreversible.

The history of the union movement - or at least of its officials - has been essentially male. But with the entry of women into the workforce in the 'seventies and 'eighties, there is new pressure for representative positions for women in the trade union hierarchy.

At the recent Congress Kelty announced his intention that women should make up half of the ACTU executive by the turn of the century. He nominated the nurses’ Pat Staunton to succeed Martin Ferguson as an ACTU vice-president when Ferguson becomes ACTU president at the next federal election.

However, in what became a hallmark of the difficulties faced by Congress delegates this year, the most senior official in the footwear and textile workers’ union, Bill Hughes, rejected all attempts to persuade him to relinquish his ACTU Executive seat to the clothing trades union’s Anna Booth. Hughes will retire anyway in a year’s time and the seat will then go to Booth. But the struggle between the old and the young, the male and the female, was a microcosm for many observers of the problems facing the ACTU.

The risk of alienating the elders of the union movement by moving too quickly is balanced by the risks to the very survival of the union movement if change is not immediate.

Already the question of ‘how fast’ appears to have caused dissension between secretary Kelty and his ally for the future, Martin Ferguson. Ferguson is a relative youngster at 36, but nevertheless a unionist in the traditional mould. He has an ear to the Kelty strategy, but also to a sense of trouble brewing in some unions as amalgama-