

## **ALP FORUM \*\*\*\***

### **Labor can win if it tackles cultural and structural problems.**

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In National elections, it is rare for Oppositions to win, but when changes occur, they are seismic. Sometimes Oppositions sneak over the line in State elections (witness Neville Wran, Bob Carr, Steve Bracks, Peter Beattie, Mike Rann) but since World War I it has never happened nationally. The common elements when Labor won nationally in 1972 and 1983 were: charismatic leadership, major Party debates on policy, and a serious attempt to engage the community.

Historically, the ALP has shown remarkable capacity for regeneration. In December 1931, the Party split three ways and was overwhelmingly defeated, but by October 1941 John Curtin was Prime Minister. Menzies beat Chifley in 1949, but by 1951 Labor succeeded in defeating the anti-Communist referendum and won a plurality of votes in the 1954 election. (In 1954, on the eve of the Split, the ALP held every State government except South Australia). Following the great Split, between 1955 and 1972 the Coalition won six consecutive elections on DLP preferences. In 1966 Labor fell to its lowest number of seats since the House of Representatives expanded in 1949, but it would have won in 1969 if the seats in the House of Representatives had been distributed on the basis of 'one vote = one value'. Whitlam won office in 1972, and the DLP imploded. After the 1975 landslide, Labor took just over seven years to win again. (Wran won in New South Wales in 1976). By the 2007 election, Labor will have had eleven years in Opposition. In the past, signs of recovery have included strong and/or courageous and/or charismatic leadership, a major renewal of policy and a vigorous engagement with the community in selling it, recruitment of impressive candidates for marginal and safe seats.

Nevertheless, I want to convey a message of optimism. Yes, Labor can win the 2007 Federal election, but we need to make courageous strategic decisions and redefine what the Party stands for to succeed. In recent years we have been preoccupied with tactics, not strategy.

Issues can turn things round relatively quickly – but clear alternatives have to be set out and there must be public confidence in people delivering the messages. There must be a reasonable lead time.

Do we achieve victory by our own efforts, cleaning up our act, showing leadership, vision and courage, engaging the community in a vigorous policy debate, or do we rely on Coalition failure – a sudden upsurge in interest rates, a sudden downturn in the economy, another Medicare failure, a series of major scandals, or a bitter split over the Howard v. Costello rivalry?

### **Some problem areas:**

1. The ALP is no longer a National Party (strong centre, weak periphery, national or centralising goals) but a Federal Party once again (strong periphery, weaker centre, patronage and preferment machines in states and territories). There has been a failure to recognise that the move towards making the ALP a National Party has stalled, and gone into reverse. In 2005 – as in 1915 or 1925 – we are essentially a Federal Party. Public funding of National election campaigns has helped to conceal this central weakness.
2. There has been a major political realignment – important but not clearly recognised. **Will it be permanent?** Under John Howard, the Liberal Party now has a strong centre, and now sees the States as a side-show, of only marginal interest. All their efforts, skills and recruitment are concentrated on the **national** agenda. (Ours are not).
3. The Incumbency problem: the times suit Governments and damage Oppositions. There are few exceptions. Incumbency is a powerful factor in securing re-election, because incumbents are the known and can appeal to security and track record: Oppositions can only sell challenge, ideas, concepts, alternatives – and their potential. Resources available to Governments puts them in a strong position to undertake almost permanent campaigning. Every State Opposition is in deep trouble, and oppositions are very feeble in the US, the UK and France. This may be reinforced by a prevailing sense of insecurity after 9/11 2001, in which voters prefer to vote for the known (of whatever complexion) rather than the unknown. The ALP won a majority of seats in both the Commonwealth and State/ Territory elections in Victoria, Tasmania and the ACT, but secured a low vote national vote in New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia and the

Northern Territory. In some Queensland seats the discrepancy between the ALP vote for State and Commonwealth elections in the same polling booth was as high as 25%.

4. Policy anorexia. The last ALP National Conference which made a significant impact in public policy was in 1981, in Melbourne – but by 1983 the reworking was largely irrelevant. In government we developed an excessive reliance on lobbyists and focus groups. The Party dropped out of policy making Federally between 1983 and 1996, when many policies were adopted top down and imposed on a reluctant Party (uranium, HECS, selling Qantas and Commonwealth Bank) – and after 1996, with the ‘small target’ strategy, we never resumed the practice of active policy formulation. It is difficult to recall any significant debates on public policy at National Conferences in 1991, 1994, 1998, 2000 and 2004. National Conference (400 delegates, all factional warriors, meeting over three days) is not a precision instrument to deal with policy. [Additional notes: The 1994 Conference produced the ‘affirmative action’ policy – but this applied only within the Party. Similarly with the 2002 Special Conference on the 50: 50 rule. Gareth Evans organised a major rewriting of policy in 1998 – to avoid duplication and contradictions, but it was essentially an editorial job, as he would be the first to admit.] New methods for adopting and promoting policy are needed. It cannot be done at a National Conference to be held in April 2007.
5. Factions: ‘the elephant in the room’ problem. Factions become ends in themselves (executive placement agencies, game playing, tribes). Factional warlords essentially operate at the State rather than the National level – because that’s where the power is. You can’t do much better than scoring eight out of eight in State and Territory elections. The warlords regard themselves as part of a success story. Are they wrong? But if Labor lost office in the States and Territories and had no patronage to dispense, factions would disappear or change dramatically. The fracturing of the Left, and creation of sub-factions and personal fiefdoms, has given the Right a positional advantage which it does not necessarily deserve. Ideology became irrelevant and the property theory of politics took over. 36,000 members, living and dead, in 150 Federal electorates = 240 people per seat. If a voting bloc of 300 people could guarantee a safe seat for life, would it be a good investment to

set one up? You bet. The ALP runs some risk of becoming a transactional party rather than a commitment party. This reflects the decline of the social – a phenomenon described in Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* (2000). The ALP has been privatised and the factions are the majority and minority stakeholders. However, some take the optimistic view, that factions may be the last phase of an archaic political structure, a collection of beached whales, memorably illustrated in an *Age* cartoon by Bruce Petty (17/1/05), likely to be rendered obsolete by adopting new political techniques such as ‘direct democracy’, using instruments such as [www.GetUp.org.au](http://www.GetUp.org.au) or [www.laborfirst.com.au](http://www.laborfirst.com.au)

6. What incentives could one offer a prospective ALP branch member, other than being recruited as part of a faction? Influence policy? Help choose MPs? Interesting branch meetings? Making a difference? (One would need a black sense of humour to even suggest it). People once joined the Party because of opposition to the death penalty and Vietnam. Did anyone join us because we sold Qantas or were silent on *Tampa* or David Hicks? Pragmatism (good for factions, bad for community recruitment) v. Ideology/ Core beliefs (bad for factions, good for community recruitment). There are now two classes of members – the fast track (insiders) and the impotent (outsiders). Rank and file members are disappearing. But securing a career, getting on, joining the *nomenklatura* – these are all powerful reasons.
7. Confusion between strategy and tactics. With strategy we should be able to say, ‘We know where we are going...’ With tactics, during an election, we say, ‘At 1.30 this afternoon, we’ll announce where we are going’. This is the lucky envelope approach to policy announcements.
8. Confusion about core beliefs. We should adopt the useful summary proposed by Bob Hawke and Neville Wran in their 2002 National Committee of Review Report. Must be a strong commitment to democracy both inside and outside the Party. The ‘democratic socialist’ objective, last modified in 1981, is still in the ALP’s National Constitution. When was the last time we spoke to it or acted on it? Is there any policy that we would not give up, if asked nicely?

9. Low levels of community engagement. Small Party (good for factions, bad for community engagement) v. Big Party (bad for factions, good for community engagement). 'Echo chamber politics' (obvious parallels between ALP and RCC).
10. Narrow recruiting base. Compare Hawke's 1983 Ministry\* with Beazley's Shadow Ministry (16 apparatchiks, 10 union officials, four others).

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\* First Hawke Ministry:

4 solicitors  
4 academics/ teachers  
4 retailers  
3 union officials  
2 farmers

one each: barrister, medical practitioner, clergyman, policeman, economist, chartered accountant, industrial advocate, research officer, engine driver, shearer. Three had also been State MPs.

None had been a minder and the only apparatchik, Mick Young, had been a shearer who became a State and National Secretary.

Four of the group had Oxford degrees (and three were Rhodes Scholars).

Many of the 27 had diverse skills and had held several jobs e.g. Lionel Bowen and Clyde Holding had been solicitors and State MPs, Gareth Evans a barrister and academic, Mick Young a shearer, a Party official and National Secretary, John Kerin an axeman, chook strangler and economist, Brian Howe a clergyman, sociologist and academic, Tom Uren a boxer, prisoner-of-war and retailer.

However, there are some strengths in Beazley's Shadow Ministry: they are younger, academically well qualified, with an infinitely better gender balance. But are they social hermits? Do they blink when exposed to the light?

11. The three Presidential panellists ('the rotisserie') are the only office holders in the Party not dependent on the factions. The October-November 2003 election was not exactly a ringing endorsement for the factional system. The warlords disliked the popular vote because they could not control it or predict the result. And yet in the indirect election for National Conference delegates, conducted at State Conferences with a complex system of interlocking alliances ('If you support us on this, we'll support you on that'), the overwhelming majority

elected were deeply committed factional warriors. The National Executive was elected on strict factional lines. Carmen Lawrence, Warren Mundine and myself are the only three people in the Party who can claim a mandate from branch members. We might be able to claim some moral authority, but we have no vote on the National Executive.

12. Labor must act and speak courageously, take on tough issues, and be shown to be acting strategically, not tactically. Unfortunately, we have fallen into the practice of acting tactically, producing policies as press releases. Campaigns put too much emphasis on stunts, photos ops, funny hats and press releases. We have a maximum of twenty-seven months until the next Federal election, a date which John Howard will choose. This ought to instil a sense of urgency. We must stop playing personality politics and concentrate on issues. There are grounds for optimism. It should be recalled that in 1995 the Liberal Party faced a near death experience, yet in barely thirteen months Howard took the Coalition to a massive win. But to win, Labor requires a massive cultural change, at least as massive as the changes needed for the Department of Immigration – it can't be done by fiddling at the edges or clever rule changes.
13. The ALP is not, and should not be, simply a machine that organises election campaigns every few years – it needs to provide spiritual, ethical and intellectual nourishment to the Australian people, on an ongoing basis, and promote a creative, generous nation. Labor must tell a story, a grand narrative of where we want Australia to go, and its place in the world. (Howard tells a story – one that divides, building on fear and alienation, laced with 'wedge politics' and 'dog whistle' language – but it is powerful and sells well. Labor does not appear to have a story to tell: we provide good Governments and ineffective Oppositions). I have identified 32 major issues since 1996 where Howard has inflicted significant damage on the Australian community and Labor did not lay a glove on him. Labor must promote an inclusive agenda, not an excluding one. Currently, there is a significant disenfranchisement of our traditional vote, people who feel lonely and alienated from the Party they have always voted for. If we do not bring them home, the Party's heart and mind will die.

14.Litmus issues v. Spectrum issues. Which are vote changers?

1996-2001 'Small target' ('I'm not Keating...')

2001-03 'Internal distraction' (60:40 > 50:50)

2003-05 'Energetic improvisation' (Tactics v. strategy)

2005- 'Son of small target'.