

Labor's Malaise and What to Do About It: Mending the ALP

Paper to be presented by the Hon Dr Race Mathews at the ALP Kooyong Federal Electorate Assembly Workshop on 'Our Democratic Voice: Living the Values of Our Party's Constitution', Sunday, 6 March, 2005

Keeping the ALP on course and effective has never been easy. The battle to preserve its social-democratic identity and integrity has had to be fought and fought again. The problem in the past has been would-be takeovers, both from within and without. In the 1930s – to go back no further – it was the Langites in NSW and their allies elsewhere who had to be overcome, in the 1940s the communists, in the 1950s the Santamaria Movement, and in the 1960s a troglodyte Left, as exemplified in Victoria by the Trade Unionists' Defence Committee.

Today the threat stems not from an identifiable – and thereby the more easily confronted and overcome – adversary, but from a malaise that is the more insidious for being of the party's own making. The malaise is exemplified by the party member quoted in a recent newspaper report (*Sunday Age*, 20/2/05) as expressing incredulity that belonging to the party could be thought to be for any purpose other than the furthering of a career. The trend is towards a wholly professionalised party on the American model, where volunteer involvement is largely absent other than during election campaigns.

The origins of the malaise are plain. The professionalising of the ALP such as through the party organization and staffing for MPs and ministers has not been accompanied by a comparable growth in the number and involvement of the party rank and file to whom they are properly accountable. An imbalance is evident between the party's roles, respectively as a career choice and as a political and social movement seeking in association with its trade union affiliates to both form governments and secure informed public consent for social democratic principles and policies. In summary, the party has given rise to two cultures, which currently are mutually uncomprehending and perhaps in part antipathetic towards one another, and need to become much more closely aligned. It is vital for the party's well-being and also the future of Australian democracy that the imbalance should be corrected and the trend reversed.

After four successive federal election defeats, the high cost of inaction – of allowing the imbalance to persist and the malaise to fester – is plainly evident. Its effect has been to hollow out the party's real membership – as opposed to those recruited to stack branches – and impair its capacity for effective policy development and advocacy. Also impaired have been the party's capacity to secure the best possible candidates for party and public office, together with its sense of its own identity, principles and rapport with the ordinary Australians who gave birth to it, and whose interests it must serve.

This is not to say that the party is incapable of a resurrection as great as resulted in the elections of the Curtin, Chifley, Whitlam, Hawke and Keating governments. However, the prospects for improvement are not helped by simplistic explanations, such as attributing the malaise wholly or substantially to the party factions.

What is too readily identified as 'the factional problem' is not the cause of the malaise, but symptomatic of it. Those mistakenly equating factionalism with original sin should reflect on the comparably disastrous 1950s and 1960's experience, when the party in Victoria was monolithically controlled and obsessively micro-managed by the Trade Unionists' Defence Committee.

Proportional representation in elections for party office as introduced subsequent to the 1970 Federal Intervention in Victoria gave rise to the factions, but also provides the party's best safeguard against a further total domination of its affairs by any one of its constituent elements. There is no salvation for the party in 'back to the future' strategies that seek to replace its current sources of dysfunction with those which have already long since been tried and discredited.

As Santayana reminds us, 'Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it. Correct the malaise – the wider imbalance - within the party and the frequently dysfunctional behaviours of the factions will largely correct themselves.

The party's tragedy is that the pro-active potential of the 1970 reforms has never been given a chance. The cultural transformation of the party along inclusive and democratic lines that the changes were intended to effect died of neglect, due in part to the untimely death of its greatest protagonist, Ian Turner.

Others – including, to my shame, myself – took our eyes off the ball following our election to parliament, when our prior and over-riding responsibility should have been to ensure that the party was once and for all placed on a secure and sustainable social democratic footing. The challenge for the party now is to remedy our omissions.

The key requirement is for the much larger and more representative membership that would enable the ALP to once again be seen as attuned to the hopes and fears of its supporters and beneficiaries in the wider community. A significant risk is that the large numbers of enthusiastic new members thereby attracted to the party might well find it insufficiently prepared to receive and retain them. It is matter of notoriety that many – maybe most – intending new members attend their initial branch meetings and are never seen again. Nor is this any cause for surprise.

The ALP's branches and electorate assemblies have never been properly supported, or had other than lip-service given to their needs. The party has

mostly provided no training for chairmen, secretaries or treasurers. There is no instruction in how meetings can be made more effective, attractive and inclusive.

Branches are neither offered accredited speakers and discussion materials in conformity with settled strategies for public policy and current affairs consciousness-raising and consultation, nor supported in securing them for themselves. There is no support or encouragement for branches in exploring new technological resources that might give rise to more interesting proceedings, or facilitate reaching out for mutually rewarding links with kindred organisations.

The potential of innovatory structures such as web-based branches and branches reflective of affinities such as of vocation, profession, special interest or ethnicity has as yet barely begun to be tapped – albeit already in some cases exploited and perhaps rorted. Newcomers to branches are as likely to be ignored or treated with suspicion as welcomed and made to feel at home.

There are no adequate induction process whereby new members are enabled to familiarise themselves with what the party stands for and how it seeks to achieve its objectives and goes about its affairs. There is no systematic preparation of members for the responsibilities of party or public office.

The issue is in no sense Left versus Right. Neither has clean hands. Both are culpable. The Right-wing Labour Unity faction currently in control of the Victorian ALP (and of which I am a long-time member) shows no sign of being any more prepared to undertake the necessary process of cultural change than the Socialist Left faction that it has so recently supplanted.

What then is to be done? The party should – at the least - implement a nine-point program for change as follows:

- (a) Acknowledge that the real wealth of the ALP is in its human capital, and commit in explicit terms to making the most of it. Give explicit acknowledgement to the role of the party as being - among other things – an organization whose members teach and learn from one another, and thereby become the more effective as advocates for it in the wider community.
- (b) Consistent with the key importance of human capital to the party, assign responsibility for its development to – say - the party's senior vice-president, who thereby accepts accountability for it to the Administrative Committee and the conference.
- (c) Appoint a Member Development Advisory Council drawn from disciplines including – but not limited to - community development, human resource development and adult education.
- (d) Provide appropriate resourcing for the development and reinforcing of high levels of member involvement satisfaction, through measures including induction courses for new members; training and

- credentialing of chairmen, secretaries, treasurers, discussion leaders, campaign directors and fund-raisers; and skills acquisition counselling for prospective candidates for higher party positions and public office.
- (e) Provide pro-active support for branches and federal electorate assemblies in upgrading the quality of their proceedings, through initiatives such as design and delivery of discussion programs and the provision of access to appropriate speakers, discussion materials and audio-visual and IT resources.
 - (f) Institute an annual audit of key performance indicators for branch effectiveness, with items to include year-on-year membership figures, new members enrolled, concession rate members proportionate to membership, number of meetings held, attendances at meetings proportionate to membership, voting at FEA elections proportionate to membership, and participation in designated indicator activities such as election campaign involvement proportionate to membership. Require audit reports to be submitted to branch AGMs for sign-off prior to being forwarded for presentation to the Conference.
 - (g) Ensure that the party rules are fairly and unflinchingly upheld, and abuses including branch-stacking are thereby eliminated.
 - (h) Ensure that the party has candidates in whom it can feel pride and confidence, through pro-active pre-selection processes that reach out for those best equipped to further its objectives and reflect an appropriate diversity of backgrounds, vocations and experience. Pre-selections shouldn't be limited to choosing between the party members who happen to put up their hand for the job.
 - (i) Require election of conference delegates by proportional representation for both party and union candidates.

None of this is likely to occur other than through relentless grassroots pressure and agitation. The local forums mentioned in recent newspaper reports are straws in the wind, indicative of a gathering storm of member and supporter discontent. A grassroots movement for reform will inevitably emerge, and well-wishers should be ready to respond to its call.

Meanwhile members and supporters of the party need to guard against exclusively complaining about its shortcomings, and lead by example. Local problems such as a failed or failing branch may be amenable to local solutions. If local resources aren't up to the task, the party office should be required to lend a hand, and the branch shouldn't shut up until its requirements have been met. If it isn't a local branch that's required so much as one based on other affinities or technologies, then those wishing to comprise it should take the initiative in bringing it about.

If local delegates to the state conference are seen by members not to be effectively representing their points of view, or failing to secure the support for local organization that is felt to be necessary, then other candidates should be

sought out and encouraged to nominate. And conference delegates shouldn't be backward about nominating for membership of the Administrative Committee, where the necessary reforms and the wider renewal process can be pushed forward.

Irrespective of whether – like me - members belong to one or other of the factions, they should demand accountability from all of them. In particular, the factions should be held accountable for the quality of their nominees for party and public office, not least through concerned conference delegates nominating themselves for the Public Office Selection Committee.

Needless to say, the task of overcoming entrenched apathy and inertia is not for the faint-hearted or too easily frustrated. It requires adherents and advocates of renewal and reform who sign up for the process in the clear understanding that it will not be completed other than in the medium to long haul, and in the face of set-backs and disappointments. Nor should they expect for their pains other than to have their motives questioned and their characters impugned, by those who have a vested interest in retaining the party organization in its current state of ineffectuality and disarray.

If all this sounds too hard, or the chances of success too remote, it should be kept in mind that we are not alone. Concern about where Australia is heading, the uncaring society we are becoming and the likely disastrous consequences for future generations is widespread. Given a lead such as this workshop may help to provide, others may rally to the renewal process. It may be that, as many fear, the party will turn out to lack enough character and flexibility to mend its ways, but how will any of us know if we don't try? And will history be forgiving of those who abandon the struggle?

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