



Make it Better: Building a Labor Party for the 21st century
Address Delivered by Mark Dreyfus QC, MP at the Higgins Federal Electorate Assembly 'A
Labor Party for the Twenty-First Century' Conference, 19 April 2009.

It is a pleasure it is to see so many party members here today. That a conference about the future of our party can bring together so many is testament to the dedication, enthusiasm and commitment of our party members.

The Australian Labor Party is the great party of Australian politics. We have a long and proud history of more than a century of progressive reform. We have shaped Australia for the better.

- We have protected and enhanced the rights of working people,
- We have created an open economy that is engaged with the world and in which there is an active role for government.
- We have created opportunities for all Australians through building a public education system,
- We have guaranteed universal access to health care through our public hospitals, through Medicare and through the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme.
- We have built an open and tolerant society through a non-discriminatory migration program, through advancing women's rights, through giving rights to indigenous Australians

We have a proud history of achievement.

I want to suggest today that sustaining our party and advancing our agenda requires us to be constantly receptive to new ideas. We need to examine how we operate – how we attract members, how we retain members and make full use of their talents and energies, how we engage with the communities in which we live, how we campaign at elections and between elections, how we govern. To do this, particularly when we are in government at both a Federal and a state level, we need to embrace a culture of greater openness within our Party.

Every single person in this room should be proud of our Party. No analysis of our current situation can proceed without acknowledging our electoral success in this state. Since 1980, we have beaten our conservative opponents in six out of the last eight state elections. In Victoria, we have achieved a majority of the two-party preferred vote in nine out of the last eleven Federal elections.

That success however is no reason for complacency or for hubris. Many of the younger members in this room would not remember the state of the party in the late 1990s. This was a period of despondency within the Party. In the wake of the deep unpopularity of the Cain and Kirner governments, we had been decimated by the Coalition at two state

elections. Although the Federal results had been positive for Labor in Victoria, we were in Opposition having failed in 1998 to make the Howard Government a one term government.

In the midst of this, I was asked to conduct a review of the Victorian ALP, resulting in a report, I delivered to a Special State Conference of the Party in December 1998. In that report, I suggested the following five objectives for the Party:

- a Party which is re-engaged with the community and with its own membership
- a Party with a larger membership
- a Party which operates democratically
- a Party which fully uses the talent and energy of its volunteer members
- a Party focussed on winning government

Much has changed for our party since I delivered that report but these objectives are still relevant today, if not more so.

To put the report in context, the review was established by the Administrative Committee on 9 October 1998. I was given until the beginning of December to review, with the assistance of a reference panel of Party members, a range of issues including membership, participation in party activities, relationship with the union movement and the wider community, financial planning and new technology. It was obviously a very tight timeframe for this task.

In that period, I received over 200 written submissions from a wide range of Party members, branches, parliamentarians and affiliated unions. There was significant concern at the time about branch stacking and many of the submissions I received dealt with the issue of branch stacking and internal procedures.

Any discussion around membership in the ALP has to come to grips with branch stacking. Many people in our Party actively recruit new members to the ALP. I know that many people in this room are already doing this. There is nothing wrong with this – in fact, it should be supported. But, as with other party activities, this must be done with integrity.

My conclusions in the 1998 Report are worth repeating:

The Party needs to encourage recruitment of new members, and welcome new members into the Party and its activities. It is an indication of an over-intensification of factional activity that the recruitment of new members into particular branches is viewed with suspicion: in a fully functioning Party, recruitment should always be welcomed. But the Party is entitled to insist that all of its members are people who support the aims of the Party, who wish to join the Party and be involved in its activities. The recruitment of people who are members in name only and who do not participate in Party activities except to vote at the behest of others is unacceptable and undermines the internal democracy and functioning of the Party.

Eleven of the 27 recommendations in the 1998 report, concerned membership and membership procedures. In some cases, these were simple administrative changes that were required to improve processes relating to membership and administration.

Some were reasonably straightforward and simple measures for membership, including:

- The principle that the membership fees of every member be paid by that member, except in cases of real financial hardship or temporary absence;
- That members be required to sign annual renewal forms; and
- That membership of affiliated unions for affiliation purposes be determined by reference to the membership figure stated in that union's last return lodged with the Industrial Relations Commission

These measures were taken up and I think have played an important role in stamping out some of the more egregious examples of branch stacking and undermining of the Party's principles.

By contrast, the recommendation that the Party establish a recruitment unit, staffed by people with recruitment expertise was not implemented. Nor does it appear that the detailed recruitment strategy designed to substantially increase Party membership has ever been prepared or implemented.

It is indicative of the party's approach on these matters – we have been able to deal in a technical way with the worst examples of rorting and branch stacking, but we have been unable to make the cultural changes that would result in positively engaging with members.

As a party organisation, we have some real positives, including:

- Long standing membership among that generation who joined in the 1960s and 1970s
- Strength within ethnic communities
- Strength in the inner city
- Proportionality in party elections
- Affirmative action which has promoted the rise in the number of women in party positions
- A stronger and more active membership base than the Liberal Party
- Some innovative branches that are engaging with both members and local communities

There are also some very clear challenges that the Party continues to face:

- We do not have an active membership program, either to recruit members or to retain existing members;
- Many members feel disconnected from the decision making processes of the Party;
- We have large areas of Melbourne in which we hold seats but which lack a strong party organisation;
- We struggle to engage young people;
- Relatively few members of affiliated trade unions are actually members of the Party

My key suggestion for the future health and electoral success of the Party would be a larger membership base, one that is involved in the central decision making processes of the Party and involved in Party bodies that are connected to the communities around them.

To achieve this, we need a new culture of greater openness. One of the most striking developments over the last decade, at least in English speaking countries, has been new forms of engagement in the political process through the internet. This has included less formally organised, but no less passionate, engagement in politics. Our party has to open its processes to meet these new forms of engagement.

For the last nine months, in my role as Chair of the Party's National Policy Committee, I have been working on a new National Platform for presentation to National Conference. The Committee has taken a view that we should have a consultation process that is as open to all Party members as is possible. For that reason, National Policy Committee has had two rounds of consultation. The second round centres on a publicly available consultation draft of the Platform, which was made available on 6 April.

We need to throw the doors of membership wide open. The best way to stamp out branch stacking is to massively expand the membership base. We need to encourage as many Labor supporters to join the Party as possible. As a party organisation, separate from the party in government, we need to stop turning inwards and face outwards to the community and to our supporters.

The concept of membership has to shift within the party. Some suggestions:

- A single flat membership rate of \$10 or \$20
- A removal of the requirement to attend branch meetings
- Members should be able to form groups which they could register with the State party.
- Head Office should establish a Party intranet – perhaps based on the principles of social networking sites such as Facebook – through which party members could easily engage and communicate with one another and through which they can organise on-line.
- Members should be able to join as many branches or groups within the party as they see fit.

We need the party administration to be developing tools for members that are not prescriptive but that are supportive. We need a recruitment strategy which trains local members to be activists for our party. We need materials that can be adapted for local circumstances through the simple use of desktop publishing programs and that could be produced out of the party administration.

Instead of holding up membership applications at Membership Committee, or preventing the creation of new branches, the party administration should be providing party members with the tools to attract more members and establish more party groups.

While we should retain the formal structures of the Party around election of delegates to Conference, preselections for public office and the election of policy committees, we should otherwise allow members to organise in the best way they see fit.

Some people will want to organise locally. For others, they may want to organise around issues or interests or organising on-line. They might only be interested in campaigning or solely stimulated by policy development. And some people may want to do a combination of the all of these.

A new member might join a local group, perhaps one organised by the local state MP, but might also join a statewide Labor environmental group or a regional women's network. Some people won't be interested in joining a local branch at all.

It is fair to say that most people who join a political party are not much interested in standing orders or rules. They are interested in being part of a team that wins government, in being part of a group of people with whom they can exchange ideas. They are interested in campaigning and they are interested in building our Party within their communities. They are interested in being listened to and they are interested in making a contribution to policy development.

Our relationship with the trade union movement has been the bedrock of our party for over a century. Our party structures have to uphold this enduring relationship, but must also encourage membership and ensure democratic processes. The relationship must be based on an open approach rather than a closed approach in which some union leaders act to defend their prerogatives above all else.

There needs to be an incentive created so that the affiliated unions take direct steps to encourage union members to join the party. One idea would be for union representation to be based not on the number of members of the union, but the number of union members who are members of the Party. To encourage this, members of the party who are also union members could pay a much lower ALP membership fee. Another possible reform would be to have union delegations to State Conference directly elected by union members, while retaining the requirement that such delegates be party members.

Adjusting union representation in this way might lead to more party members feeling that they have a say in the running of our party. The party must be more than simply easy to join. It must also be good to belong to.

The links between the Party and the union movement are important, and we should be strengthening them by increasing the involvement of rank and file union members within the Party. The relationship must be more than one between union secretaries and State Conference. It must even be more than the Your Rights at Work campaign that was so successful at the last election.

It might be asked, if we are so successful at the moment, why we need to undertake any sort of reform. Surely our current structure has delivered the electoral goods. The answer is that it will not always be so. At some point, the electoral tide will turn.

Politics goes through cycles and at some point we will be out of government again. I hope this point is many years away but we can only ensure this through renewal and avoiding stagnation. We need to keep our focus on the Party's main resource, which is the dedication and skills of Party members.