

ADDRESS TO VICTORIAN ALP STATE CONFERENCE

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From the moment I was asked to do this review I had new optimism about Labor in Victoria. Here was I, not a Party official or a member of Parliament but an ordinary Party member being asked to contribute to Labor's renewal. I would like to think I have helped a little in the process.

In my report, I have made a number of recommendations, and I have suggested some objectives for the Victorian ALP:

- 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.

Can everyone here imagine that these objectives can be shared by every member across every faction? That's the kind of unanimity that renewal demands.

I am not going to repeat what I have said in the report, but I did want to talk about some other matters which may affect consideration of the report.

Wider context for Labor in Australia

The first is the political context in which reform of the ALP is taking place. Australians have built a strong political culture, almost without realising it. I am not talking only about the mainstream parliamentary political culture. I am talking about the many small ways Australians practise politics, and do it well, in school councils, sporting clubs, charitable groups, service clubs and organising voluntary associations of all kinds. Martin Krygier wrote about this in his 1997 Boyer lectures, when he contemplated how Australia has managed to build a civil society. Krygier points out that all this activity is voluntary, and conducted outside the control of the state. It is not rigid. It is inclusive. Mostly, it is tolerant. People with small and useful aims get to participate just as much as people with grand visions.

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The Labor Party has been a major element of Australia's political culture for more than 100 years. As a voluntary political association, it has been a community based organisation like the many others I mentioned, and this is the wider context in which reform of the Labor Party should be considered. We need to consider the health of the political culture at large and craft our internal reforms the better to fit that wider context. That way, we maximise our chances of turning internal reform into external success. We will be more likely to strike the right note for our times.

I suggest there are two factors of greater significance in assessing the wider context. The first is the general alienation from politics which has beset all western democracies in recent years. The second is the rise of One Nation and the politics of hatred.

Conference delegates are all familiar with the problem of people "abstaining from politics", as the American, Jack Fuller, puts it. He argues that people are abstaining in numbers because "the public debate today does not engage or even show any particular interest in them and people cannot see themselves in the political system's eyes any more". When Australian people look into the Labor Party's eyes, they ought to see themselves and their concerns reflected. The reform I recommend has that aim. But it has another, more ambitious aim: when Australians consider what is to be done about society's contemporary problems and when they imagine a better country for their children, they ought to find it a natural thing to be looking *through* the Labor Party's eyes.

I am not under any illusions about the difficulties. Many long established community organisations in Australia, not just political parties, are experiencing declining membership. This problem is familiar to trade unions as well. Not just the Labor Party but all political parties are facing the difficulty of engaging people in political activity in a time of a multitude of distractions. The task is to persuade a generation that has grown up channel surfing, and is now faced with not just five channels to surf, but 35 or more, and a world-wide Web to surf as well, that politics really does matter. This is no small task, but it must be attempted.

What I think this means is that the Labor Party must make itself interesting, and enjoyable, and give its activities a meaning for ordinary members. I think it means that the Labor Party must look at the organisations which do work in the Victorian community and ask “what is it about them which makes people want to join them?”. I reflected on this last week after the deaths of the five CFA firefighters, with the great outpouring of public sympathy which followed, and particularly the great spirit of the CFA organisation itself. The CFA has a huge membership; it is one of the largest volunteer firefighting forces in the world and is attracting new members, including young people, constantly. It does so because it remains connected to its community, and people see its activities as relevant and meaningful to them. The Labor Party needs to match this. The Party will not start to do this better until we can start to see ourselves as the community sees us. Do they see it as an organisation they can relate to, an organisation they can get things done in and through, an organisation which by joining will give them some small say in their futures, an organisation there is some point in joining?

The other significant factor in the wider context in which the Party is operating is the problem of One Nation. I won't dwell on it, but Labor can not simply ignore One Nation and hope it fades into oblivion. One Nation got 8.4% of Australian votes on 3 October this year. Mercifully the percentage was lower in Victoria, but you will all remember some of the well attended rallies held in Victoria by One Nation earlier this year. One Nation generated a lot of enthusiasm, much of it from people not previously involved in political activity. The Labor Party needs to analyse the data about who has been voting for One Nation. Where the profile fits traditional Labor voters, the Party has to ask the questions, without flinching: What led these people to embrace incoherence? Why is intolerance attractive to these voters? Why couldn't they see in and through Labor's eyes anymore?

Change and renewal

I mentioned renewal earlier, because that's how I see the process the Party has been engaged in since the election loss in 1996. The Labor Party does have a magnificent capacity for renewal, like a living thing. The Labor Party has throughout this century shown that capacity, a capacity to regenerate after electoral defeat, to create new structures and new policies when they are needed.

Graham Freudenberg took issue with those who want to label what they disagree with in the Labor Party as the degeneration of the Party. What others see as degeneration Freudenberg sees as “the Labor Party’s capacity for change and renewal”. The Labor Party has no reason to fear renewal. The Party can remind itself that it had the courage in the past to trust itself with debate and change. Just recall some of the great shifts in thinking for which Labor is responsible in the government of Australia - in immigration, in establishing stronger ties with our region, in Aboriginal affairs, in health, in education.....Again and again, on large issues and small, the Labor Party has shown a capacity for renewal. The reforms I have recommended are intended to be consistent with that tradition. The Party can renew itself with more members, especially younger members. It will revivify itself if it consciously sets out to preserve the integrity of its processes. It will thrive if it opens its decision making to different sources of information and opinion.

The Labor Party’s processes matter, and some reform is essential, because members of the Party, and people the Party wants to attract as members, need to feel confident in the integrity of those processes. The resolution establishing this review referred to “enhancing the effectiveness and transparency of the Party and its structures”. The Party’s processes do need to be visible, accessible and understandable in order to promote confidence and trust. The appearance of the Labor Party’s processes is as important as their actual operation because many members, and many more supporters, see the Party only from a distance. They judge the Party, and decide whether and how much to support the Party, from that distance. Activists in the Party who see its processes up close need to stand back from time to time to try to “see themselves as others see them”.

This week has provided a dramatic example of the importance of that intangible asset, trust. The disgrace experienced by two leading Australian cricketers, on being revealed as selling information to a bookmaker, results from the sense of betrayal felt by other Australians who want to believe that the members of the national cricket team behave with honour. The same goes for political parties. Members of political parties need to know that the rules of the Party are being adhered to and the Party’s principles upheld. They need to feel that the Party they support is worthy of their

trust. I say again: the Labor Party is a voluntary organisation. To continue to attract and keep its volunteers there needs to be goodwill and trust in the Party and its processes.

There is no point having a party which is a hollow shell existing in name or paper only. The Labor Party has always understood this, understood that its strength comes from its members, unlike our opponents who depend on wealthy backers. Membership makes the Party, not the other way around.

I want to say something about the approaches I took in doing this report. Because I am interested in renewal, I am not interested in looking back, except so far as the Party can learn from its past mistakes. I am interested in looking forward, which is why my recommendations focussed on the future and why I have rejected calls for some kind of standing commission of inquiry or extended investigations into various allegations which have been made. It would consume scarce resources, particularly members' time, and would continue a concentration on internal activity and perpetuate old enmities, when what is needed is to look outwards. What will serve the Party's interests is some principles and rules which will govern future conduct in the Party. For example, I recommend the adoption of the principle that the fees of every member be paid by that member so that in future this will occur whatever has been the practice in the past. The Party needs to say to all its members: "All are welcome, provided you are prepared to make that minimum commitment of paying your own fees". Similarly, for future party elections and pre-selections I recommend that candidates pledge that in those future elections or pre-selections they have not been involved in any organised payment of other members' fees. These and other recommendations are focussed on the future, so that Party members and supporters can look forward with confidence in the integrity of Party processes.

The other significant feature of the approach I have taken is that I have tried to avoid recommending reforms which create more internal bureaucracy. As I say in the report, the Party is a volunteer organisation. Its energies and resources, which are limited, should be focussed externally and not on internal policing, because ultimately no rules changes can ensure an end to manipulation of Party procedures. There needs

to be a change to the culture of the organisation, to create a culture in which the interests of the Party as a whole are always put ahead of factional interests.

I have also tried to fit my recommendations within another great Labor tradition: the tradition of self education. Many contributions to Australia and the labor movement were built on people's efforts to educate themselves. Watson, Fisher, Curtin, Chifley and Keating are some of those people.

A Party can self-educate too. It may be that a mark of the success of Labor's factions will be their gradual fading now. A measure of the party's self-confidence should be an easing of the discipline, the 'closed backroom-ness' that formal factionalism inevitably brings. I am not saying 'end' or 'finish', I am saying 'ease' and 'fade'. We know that in politics factions always arise in some form. But they cannot be allowed to weaken the larger body of which any faction is just one part.

As I said, membership makes party, not the other way around. Labor is, or should be, people - not vehicle, not structure, not hierarchy. If people do not feel involved, reflected in and through Labor's eyes, they will have no reason to join, or remain in, the Labor Party.

Or they will embrace Labor's opponents, and fight us with the ferocity of the abandoned. The Labor tradition is to abandon no-one. This is a time of renewal in the Party which has always done the most to embody hope. I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute.