

ON DEBATING IDEAS by David Havyatt

I greatly enjoyed the editor's account of "Annual" Conference. Conference is a tribal ritual, albeit one that changes with the culture. It is as much a reflection today of ALP culture as it was at the start of the twentieth century. Unfortunately, the culture it represents today regards the open discussion of ideas an anathema.

I briefly corresponded with a former staffer to a federal Minister (of the Right) who had commented approvingly of the emergence the Right's new magazine, *Voice*, suggesting that a vehicle for policy discussion could only be a good thing. Meanwhile *Challenge* has also been revamped.

Those standing outside the party or not attending Conference have no idea what these might contain. Having obtained copies, a brief review fulfilled my expectation that they are the usual drudge of internally focussed structural issues or the standard set of outrage about some policy of someone else (either the conservatives or the other faction) which proceeds from an assumption of values which are never stated and usually are not shared. As Rodney so well stated: "they will be the showcase for the talent of the moment exhibiting a well developed skill for orthodoxy and cliché".

The commentary on Conference was interesting on the whole reform question. The Newsletter should make a core issue of the union control of Conference - how the end of union control would also force factional reform and realignment. It was interesting to see ALP consultant Bruce Hawker expressing the view that union control needs to end in an op-ed piece in *The Australian* (22 August), though he merely cranked representation down to a "proportional" 18 per cent rather than zero. No one ever seems to explain why a unionist member of the ALP is entitled to more representation (their union and themselves), than an unemployed, student or retired member.

There seem to be three strands to thoughts about the future resonating through conference, the party more broadly and those who call themselves "progressive".

The first is the question of "leadership." Paul Howes' view that leadership alone will fix the party's problems is correctly dismissed; leaders chosen by one fix after another (of the kind Howes tries to claim credit for) know nothing about leadership. The commentary on "the godhead leader" is part of the same sorry error in presuming that leadership is something conferred rather than earned.

The second is the need for "better policy" that can engage the electorate, though where the policy initiatives can come from in a hollowed out party is another question. The party resorts instead to a reliance on external influences - professional lobbyist, think tanks or NGOs. Policy documents grow like topsy as more and more bright ideas get cobbled together.

The third is the structural question of creating a party with which people can engage and feel their contribution valued. Structural reforms of policy committees, policy forums, permitting preselection participation by non-members, are just that. They have as much substance as their online presence nationally - a list of headings under a tab "Get Involved".

John Robertson said it well in his address to Conference. “There was a time when party membership and union membership were so broadly based that to listen to ourselves was to hear the people talking. That time has gone.”

These strands – leadership, policy, organisation – are all demonstrated in the organisation and management of Conference itself. But they are all show.

The entry of the leaders is dramatically stage managed; yet John Robertson was able to be persuaded by the fixers around him to absent himself from the second day “in case his leadership came under attack”.

Policy is not debated. The issue of gay marriage is swept off to National Conference. *The Australian* has now reported that the issue will be now not even be debated there; the issue is to be declared a “conscience vote”.

The records show that Labor wins in NSW when it can win seats outside of Sydney. The “initiative” to fulfil that is merely Country Labor, a great representation of the triumph of imagery and rhetoric over reasoned action.

There is a wonderful “management novel” called *Death by Meeting* by Patrick Lencioni. It recounts the journey of an executive who discovers that the only meetings worth having are those with conflict; just like a good film, the conflict has to be managed.

The ALP has decided that conflict has to be avoided wherever possible. When not possible, the conflict is turned from a discussion of alternatives to attacks on (or defence of) individuals. The “debate” on Country Labor as relayed in the commentary on conference being Exhibit A.

The critique of the godhead leader leads to an obvious question: “How can you hope to convince a nation if you cannot trust your ability to first convince your own colleagues?” Be that caucus or conference.

Rodney noted that “a leader emerging from one fix after another represents a culture which believes there is a fix for everything”. He goes on to note: “A consequence of the culture of the fix is you lose the ability to persuade. The absence of that faculty is sadly evident in contemporary Labor politics.”

For the troika of leadership, policy and organisation to have any relevance to reviving the ALP, the ALP has to stand **for** something. That something is not just the amorphous “workers” – the politics of aspiration makes most workers seek to avoid the title. It cannot be a stand for an agglomeration of “progressive” causes – they form no coherent narrative. It cannot be something as amorphous as “education and health” – no one is against them.

That something is, and can only be, “the democratic socialisation of industry, production, distribution and exchange to the extent necessary to eliminate exploitation and other antisocial features in these fields.”

This socialist objective of the Party was adopted at the 1921 Federal Conference. The “democratic” form of it is what distinguished the ALP from Communists.

The *Combined Branches' and Unions' Steering Committee* was formed in the face of a fear that the Grouper-controlled NSW ALP, in purging Communists, would also reject socialism by democratic means. Its purpose was to ensure the preservation of the socialist objective by democratic means while purging the party of supporters for socialism by revolutionary means.

The sad decision to rename the *Combined Branches' and Unions' Steering Committee* as the *Socialist Left* meant that the last bastion of support for the socialist objective within the party seems to have disappeared.

For me the central issue for the ALP is the ability to own up to the socialist objective and to debate what it means. The twenty-two dot points that float under the General Objective do not make a coherent philosophy.

My question: is there a place for a discussion on the significance of the socialist objective? If so where should it occur? Can you imagine Julia Gillard trying to discuss it? The Fabian Society is meant to be the home for such discussion – but it never seems to really get started.

An option would be a website or “blog” called simply “Socialist Objective” that invites contributions on the theme. This would be at least a more open and honest place to discuss policy issues that matter than factionally aligned, minimally circulated printed journals.