

Australian Labor Party conference: a disintegrating bureaucratic apparatus

By Mike Head
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Last weekend, a few hundred Australian Labor Party (ALP) politicians, officials and staff converged on the national capital Canberra for a “special national rules conference”. Its ostensible purpose, in the words of ALP leader Simon Crean, was to modernise, democratise and strengthen the party, launching what he described as a crusade for “Modern Labor for a modern Australia”.

The gathering served to prove beyond all doubt that the ALP is a moribund rump, controlled by factional cliques, beholden to corporate interests and impervious to the needs and aspirations of ordinary people. While Crean proclaimed that Labor would become “more open, more honest and more equal,” never has the gulf between the ALP and the working class been wider.

The most telling sign was the deafening silence on the impending US military onslaught on Iraq. The Howard government has unconditionally committed itself to joining the Bush administration’s war, with or without the formality of a UN resolution. For his part, Crean has carefully left open the prospect of the Labor opposition backing Australian involvement in any Middle East war.

Yet, throughout the two days of supposedly “open” and “honest” debate, the war was only mentioned—briefly—once. Australian Metal Workers Union national secretary Doug Cameron declared that his union members were not interested in “bullshit” ALP rule changes; instead they wanted a clear statement of where Labor stood on the war against Iraq. He said nothing more; the purpose of his speech being to back Crean’s proposed organisational changes and bolster his leadership.

Asked later by the *World Socialist Web Site* what precisely his members were saying about a military intervention, Cameron stated: “They don’t want a war.” His admission confirms, as every opinion poll has indicated, the widespread disquiet and opposition among workers to the US war plans.

Why then, we asked, didn’t Cameron take up the issue on the conference floor? Given that Crean was clearly preparing to support the sending of Australian troops, why not openly oppose him and move a conference resolution condemning the planned US invasion of Iraq and any Australian participation? Cameron’s answer? “This is a rules conference, not a policy conference.”

The WSWs pointed out that Cameron, as head of one of the largest national unions and a leading figure in Labor’s “Left” faction, which controlled nearly half the votes at the conference, could have insisted on a debate and a vote. Instead, the Left had come to Crean’s rescue on crucial aspects of his rule changes and thus saved his leadership. Why? “To win the next election,” Cameron replied.

Also significant was the suppression of debate on Labor’s backing for the mandatory detention of asylum seekers. This was the first ALP national conference convened since last November’s election defeat, when Labor lined up completely behind the Howard government’s brutal policy of using the military to turn back refugee boats.

Outside the conference, a small group of assorted radicals and ALP

activists—banded together under the banner of “Labor for Refugees”—lobbied the delegates, pleading with Labor’s faction leaders to permit a debate on refugee policy. This was a forlorn attempt to resurrect illusions in the ALP and the perspective of pressuring it to adopt a more humane stance. Among the speakers was long-time Laborite and bookshop proprietor Bob Gould, who extolled the prospects of waging “the class struggle” inside the ALP.

Predictably, their efforts went unrewarded. With Left MP Anthony Albanese orchestrating the manoeuvres, Labor’s faction chiefs stitched up a deal to prevent the issue being raised at the conference, in return for a meaningless promise by Crean that the policy would be reviewed by a new working group of MPs and party members. As soon as the conference ended, Crean told the media he remained committed to mandatory detention.

During one conference session, Senator George Campbell, a former union bureaucrat, reported that of the 190 delegates, 70 were Members of Parliament, 84 were union officials, 17 were parliamentary staffers, 8 were full-time party officials, 6 were former MPs or staff and 2 were local government representatives, leaving just 5 “rank and file” party members (Campbell did not explain why his figures did not add up). Moreover, he added, only two delegates were not aligned to one of the three main factions, Left, Right and Centre Left.

The gathering mirrored the actual state of the ALP. Delegates openly described local party branch meetings as “boring” and ill-attended. The branches themselves were ridiculed as “virtual” (i.e. non-existent) or controlled by “branch-stackers” (factional operatives who sign up fake members and pay bulk membership dues to determine the outcome of pre-selection ballots). Other delegates spoke of a “widespread malaise in the ALP” and “deep-seated cynicism”.

Jan Primrose, a NSW delegate, described the party as “increasingly hostage to corporate donations”. She complained that the “relentless pursuit of big money” reinforced the perception among party members and trade unionists that corporate cash bought influence over the party. A loyal member of the Left faction, however, Primrose provided no details and, when asked by the WSWs, refused to elaborate.

A spokesman for the Right, NSW state secretary Eric Roozendaal, insisted that the party had to “extract funds from the corporate sector” because “traditional sources cannot match our expenses”. Veteran Right faction chief, Senator Robert Ray, disclosed that union dues, which once provided 80 percent of the ALP’s budget, now accounted for only 18 percent, forcing the party to rely on state electoral funding and business donations.

The leadership’s contempt for what remains of the ALP’s rank and file was evident when two union officials from the Victorian Left moved an amendment to require pre-selected Labor candidates to abide by the party platform. Michele O’Neil from the textile union argued that such a pledge was needed to overcome “the lack of belief in our own rank and file that the party will deliver on its policies”. Ray promptly denounced it as a

“feel good amendment” based on a “dopey principle”. The amendment was defeated, on the voices, by a loud “no”.

In an extraordinary series of outbursts, members of the warring NSW Right and Left factions confirmed that for decades the ALP’s procedures for pre-selecting parliamentary candidates and adjudicating on pre-selection disputes had been completely rigged. Former NSW state secretary John Della Bosca referred to the factional “fixing” of ballots and appeals all the way up to the national executive, which he described as a “kangaroo court”.

These admissions were just one symptom of considerable organisational disintegration. In most states, the main factions have split in recent years. The once dominant NSW Right now has three warring sub-factions, while the Left has three of its own. Likewise, the Victorian Left features three bickering camps. While delegates generally voted in three main national blocs at the conference, some fracturing occurred, complicating the backroom horse-trading.

Just as striking was the inability of Crean and the parliamentary leadership to deliver on the intended central agenda of the conference: ending the party’s domination by the factions and sub-factions, each based on distributing the spoils of parliamentary and trade union jobs and perks.

The gathering was the culmination of 10 months of intensive work by Crean and other party leaders to restructure the ALP in the wake of last year’s election loss—the third in succession—which saw Labor’s primary vote slump to 37.8 percent, its second lowest result ever. Crean commissioned two ex-party leaders, former Prime Minister Bob Hawke and former New South Wales Premier Neville Wran, to head a review panel.

Their report, delivered in August, was a bid to meet a chorus of demands in the corporate media for a drastic overhaul of the party’s structure, in order to break the grip of the factions, which are regarded as something of a barrier to revamping Labor to implement deeper attacks on democratic rights, jobs, working conditions, public services and living standards.

But, from this standpoint, the conference proved somewhat disastrous. Crean had to retreat before the faction bosses on nearly every major Hawke-Wran recommendation. Moreover, each debate was so clumsily stage-managed that Crean’s backtracking was blatant. Most deals were cobbled together at the last minute, forcing the conference secretariat to issue reams of “compromise” resolutions for delegates to rubberstamp.

On the second day, party president Greg Sword, a Crean ally who heads the National Union of Workers, had to repeatedly adjourn proceedings to allow the factional heavyweights to keep pace with the ritual process of putting the resolutions to the vote, often without debate. So farcical were the proceedings that Ray, one of the Right’s chief spokesmen, informed the conference what the exact vote would be on the main recommendation—to double the size of the national conference—well before the vote was taken.

Crean’s only claim of a significant “victory” came when the leaders of the Left faction decided, for their own reasons, to back the Hawke-Wran proposal to reduce union representation at the national conference from 60 percent to 50 percent. In the lead-up to the conference, the media had presented this issue as a litmus test of Crean’s ability to free the ALP from union influence. A defeat on this issue would have ended his leadership, and such is the lack of credible Labor politicians that there is no obvious replacement in sight.

In the only vote count for the entire conference, Crean won 121 to 69, entirely due to the 85 Left votes. The Left had previously opposed the shift from “60:40” to “50:50” and its leaders reportedly had to impose strict factional discipline to overcome internal resistance. In part, the Left heavyweights calculated that Crean’s defeat would destroy any pretence of reforming the ALP. Even more, they were anxious to undermine their

rivals in the NSW Right, who opposed the rule change.

During the orchestrated debate on the 50:50 rule, speakers from both camps loudly claimed to represent the interests of rank and file trade unionists. But everyone knew that the differences hinged entirely on entrenched factional interests. No one objected when right-wing powerbroker, Joe De Bruyn of the Shop Distributive and Allied Employees Association dismissed the proposal as “window dressing”. The NSW Right, joined by De Bruyn and other union-based party bosses in Queensland and Victoria, sought to block Crean’s plan because it would dilute their influence at state conferences, which will continue to select most national conference delegates.

When their mutual interests were threatened, the Left, Centre Left and Right factions came together to sink the first recommendation of the Hawke-Wran report, which called for direct election of part of the enlarged national conference. According to Hawke and Wran, this was essential to encourage “the increased participation of rank and file members”. But having originally committed himself to the scheme, Crean performed an about-face and stated his agreement with the Right, who claimed that direct election would only intensify factional rule. While speakers from the Left insisted that they remained supportive of direct election, the debate’s outcome was determined in advance.

For all their public enmity, the factions rule the ALP by a power-sharing arrangement. This was further institutionalised by adopting a rotating presidency, with three candidates to be elected by the party membership to serve one year each between the triennial national conferences. In effect, each faction will take the post in turn. Nevertheless, the faction leaders argued that this “reform” could be presented as a democratising step. “We’ve got to give the members something or somebody to vote for,” the Left’s Albanese stated.

Various measures adopted by the conference to curb branch-stacking and the all-important “fixing” of pre-selection disputes were largely cosmetic or designed to give the party leadership the right to impose “quality” candidates, riding roughshod over local rank and file ballots. With virtually no discussion, the conference adopted a resolution requiring “influential figures within the party to ensure that quality candidates are preselected in all seats”. Labor’s own hacks have become so electorally unappealing that the leadership is intent on installing celebrity or other carefully handpicked candidates, known for their prowess or fame in other fields, notably sport and entertainment.

Crean claimed one final “victory” with a requirement that the proportion of female MPs be lifted from the 35 percent mark set in 1994 to 40 percent by 2012. As Labor’s support among working people plunged during the 1990s, the factions sought to cultivate new bases, and recruit a fresh layer of apparatchiks, among upper middle class professional women. But even on this score, the factions mangled the final proposal. What began as a push for a symbolic 50 percent female representation by 2004 ended as a transparently token change after 11th-hour factional manoeuvring. Nevertheless, Crean claimed that the new rule was an important step forward in forging “Modern Labor”.

Crean barely survived the conference, visibly isolated. He received none of the accolades routinely afforded to Labor leaders. There were no standing ovations or gushing praise, once an obligatory feature of ALP conferences. While the state Labor leaders, presently in government in every state and territory, attended the opening day, it was noticeable that none spoke in support of Crean or his measures.

While the media, anxious to portray the ALP as a formation with some degree of popular support, gave credence to the debates over union and female representation, the editorials and commentaries were scathing of the outcome and immediately demanded much more of Crean. After stating that, “A healthy Labor Party is necessary for our political system and national development,” the *Australian*, owned by Rupert Murdoch, concluded that “his [Crean’s] reforms don’t really cut union influence,

nor fix the factions. Indeed, Crean can thank the factions he's still leader". Its editorial called for changes to Labor policy to "tackle workplace reform, job creation, privatisation, welfare, education and tax". These are code words for further demolishing workers' rights, imposing cheap labour, selling off Telstra and other utilities, gutting social programs, commercialising the education system and cutting taxation for companies and the wealthy.

Last weekend's conference was a botched attempt to clear the decks for such a platform. Crean has wasted no time in seeking to make amends, digging in his heels on refugee policy, praising George Bush's latest rhetoric against Iraq and advancing a right-wing "law and order" campaign for the October 19 by-election in the Wollongong seat of Cunningham. As for the faction leaders, while they scuttled or neutered many of Crean's proposals to preserve their own privileges, they also, in the end, lined up behind Crean's leadership and ensured his survival—at least for now.

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