

50 years of ALP soul searching

Labor has commissioned eight or nine party reviews since the 1960s (depending on how you count them). I read them so that you don't have to.

The Bracks-Macklin review is the most recent in a long history of ALP reviews. As a reforming party, we have always had a healthy capacity for self-reflection. It is worth remembering that, despite the cynicism that sometimes accompanies these reviews, our capacity to acknowledge our failings and renew our party to make is a strength and puts us in stark contrast to our opponents. Titans of the party from Bob Hawke, Bill Hayden, Neville Wran, John Faulkner, Mark Dreyfus and now Steve Bracks and Jenny Macklin have all tried their hands at party reform. We thought it might be useful to look back on the reviews to see what they had to say.

Membership

Since the 1960s, the party has been sounding the alarm over low levels of membership. Early on, there was a hope that the Labor membership would represent a sizeable portion of the Labor vote. Today, as the membership falls further, we come to terms with what it means to be a party with fewer members than the average AFL football club:

Wyndham Report 1964, 64	The individual party membership is appalling. Our membership in relation to our vote is less than one per cent! Some electorates have a pitiful handful of devoted stalwarts to keep the party alive. As our electorate vote grows, so our membership lessens.
Hawke Hayden 1979, 4	[Labor's] poor record is partly due to the relatively small size of its membership.
Hogg, 1990, p 22	How we get new members to join the party is probably the most difficult problem we face...if the party membership falls below a critical mass or becomes unrepresentative, then it will not find the stimulation or capacity for... effective political representation.
Dreyfus 1998, pg 31	...about half of the membership is concentrated in seven of the 37 Federal electorates, and that in eleven Federal electorates the Party has less than 200 members. The effect of low Party membership is to lessen effective contact with the community...
Bracks Faulkner Carr 2010, 4.4	Party continues to haemorrhage members. In NSW alone, more than 100 branches have closed in the last ten years. The Labor Party now faces a crisis in membership.
Bracks, Macklin, Discussion Paper 2020, 19	The overall number of members has increased by just 10% whereas the population of Victoria has increased by 41% over the same period.

Reforms that were taken up

- Affirmative action for women in party processes (Hawke Hayden 1979)
- Direct election of National President and Vice President (Bracks, Faulkner Carr 2010)

Reforms that were left on the shelf

- The party establish a recruitment unit staffed by professionals with recruitment expertise (Dreyfus 1998)
- An amnesty for members who have left the party (Bracks, Faulkner Carr 2010)
- An outreach organisation aimed at recruitment and engagement with progressive Australia (Bracks, Faulkner Carr 2010)

Local Branches

It seems as though branch meetings have always ‘ill lit and shabby’. Boring meetings, formal agendas and standing orders have irked members now for almost half a century:

Wyndham Report 1964, 66	Too many branches meet in ill-lit, shabby and depressing surroundings. Too much time is wasted on routine matters, Standing Orders are so restrictive and so slavishly followed that a strong heart is needed to remain.
Hawke Hayden 1979, 33	The branches failed to secure potential recruits, the concentration on local fundraising seemed obsessive and questionable...community impact seems non-existent at election time...and there seemed to be a general failure to provide an ongoing source of involvement and a worthwhile level of activity.
Dreyfus 1998, 7.2	Some Party members find branch meetings interesting and fulfilling, partly because some branches offer a range of activities for members at meetings, and work at making meetings interesting. But just as many Party members find branch meetings boring and a waste of time.
Hawke Wran, 2002	Branch meetings are no longer seen as stimulating enough to entice members to attend after a day at work...meetings are perceived as excessively formal, procedure driven and ridged.
Bracks, Faulkner, Carr 2010	Labor’s ability to form government and implement its reform program has always been based on the strength of its organisation. Labor’s model of branch organisation was adopted by many political parties here and abroad, including the Liberal Party’s predecessor, the Nationalist Party. Our structure has served us well over a long period of time. Labor has always had a stronger connection directly into the community and the workplace than our opponents. Our local level organisation provides us with the eyes and ears to listen to the concerns of everyday Australians.

Reforms that were taken up

- The party adopt a ‘community organising model’ (Bracks, Faulkner Carr 2010)

Reforms that were left on the shelf

- Policy, issue based and employment based branches (Hawke Wran 2002)
- Consolidation of branches (Hawke Wran 2002)
- Online branches (Hawke Wran 2002)
- ‘Associate’ membership class (Hawke Wran 2002)
- A central policy branch (Bracks, Faulkner Carr 2010)
- Branch correspondence not responded to within three months be included in the National Executive agenda papers (Bracks, Faulkner, Carr 2010)

Branch stacking

Branch stacking isn’t mentioned in the earlier reviews, perhaps because the party had not yet democratised. With greater democracy and power for members came nefarious branch stackers who sought to manipulate the branches for their own benefit. For a brief period in 2010 we thought we might have got on top of stacking. The more recent allegations show how wrong we were:

Dreyfus 1998, 3.3 and 6.3	[the review was] in part based on the concerns of some Party members about intensification of factional activity, allegations of “branch stacking” 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.
Hawke Wran, 2002, 8	[branch members] raised concerns over branch stacking, and the cancerous effect this activity has on the democratic traditions that have been the strength of our party.

Bracks, Faulkner, Carr 2010, 6.8	<p>The Review Committee was struck by evidence from state and territory officials of the Party, that while the practice of 'branch stacking' has been largely curtailed by the reforms of the late 1990s and 2000s, a new practice of 'branch stripping' has arisen in its place whereby branches are discouraged from recruiting members and having them participate in the affairs of the local area. This allows individuals to then exert greater influence over the outcome of ballots and contests for positions.</p>
Bracks, Mackin Discussion Paper 2020, 5	<p>Since the 1990s, there have been multiple enquiries into the scourge of branch stacking and attempts at reform. But stacking has continued, and continued to undermine the integrity and public standing of the Australian Labor Party.</p>

Reforms that were taken up

- membership fees of every member be paid by that member (Dreyfus 1998)
- anti-branch stacking pledge (Dreyfus 1998)
- Annual renewals (Dreyfus 1998)
- Two year wait for voting rights in FEA (Hawke, Hayden 2002)
- Banning of 'bulk renewals' (Hawke, Hayden 2002)
- A process to petition the party to investigate branch stacking (Hawke, Hayden 2002)

Reforms that were left on the shelf

- A tiered system of party primaries which allow Labor supporters to vote in preselection ballots (Bracks, Faulkner, Carr 2010)

Representation of women

Since the days of male dominated trade union meetings (the average unionist is now a female nurse in her 50s) the ALP has been concerned with the proper representation of women within the party. While the party could always do more, the relative success of our affirmative action policies along with the fact that our 'average' Labor voter is now female speak to the party's success at engaging with women over the last half century:

Wyndham Report 1964, 58-59	<p>The Federal Labor Women's Organisation is at present a rather insipid body. Its powers are limited and when it takes decisions, no one takes any notice of them. Either the party should have an effective womens' organisation which is allowed to play a useful and influential role, or it should have none at all. The party dare not ignore the women's vote in future elections. Therefore, steps must be taken to improve the standing of the Labor Womens Organisation.</p>
Hawke Hayden 1979, Section G	<p>Women were identified as the group most neglected by the ALP and it was frequently alleged that the image and attitudes of the ALP had little appeal for women.</p>
Hogg, 1990, p 22	<p>How we get new members to join the party is probably the most difficult problem we face...if the party membership falls below a critical mass or becomes unrepresentative, then it will not find the stimulation or capacity for... effective political representation.</p>
Dreyfus 1998, 9.3	<p>A further opportunity to re-engaging with the community will come from the Labor Womens Network initiative. The Labor Womens Network was established at the 1998 ALP National Conference, and offers a model that can take the Party into the community, by inviting and encouraging women to participate in the political process, within a flexible network structure.</p>

Reforms that were taken up

- Affirmative action for women for party officer positions (Hawke Hayden 1979)
- Labor Women's Network added to the National Rules (Hawke Wran 2002)

Factions

While factions will always exist as long as likeminded people work together to elect their candidates and advance their policy agenda, there is no doubt that the perception of factional domination has alienated many rank and file members over many years:

Hawke Hayden 1979, 4	[Labor's] poor record is party due to the parochial horizons of too many Labor chieftains.
Dreyfus 1998, p 13	There needs to be a change in 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, in which temporary majorities of voting power in Party ballots are used for the long term advancement of the Party's interests and not for short term factional advantage.
Hawke, Wran 2002, 8	The greatest concern among the rank and file is the level and nature of factionalism in the Party and the detrimental effect this has on internal democratic processes.
Bracks, Faulkner, Carr 2002, 8	"While we continue to allow the factional carve up of positions and decisions are taken on faction grounds, people will continue to be turned off." — Member, Tasmania "At the state level and as a delegate to conference, I feel like I am expected to be a mere rubber stamp and that we are not valued as informed voices." — Member, Brisbane
Bracks Macklin, Discussion paper 2020	The role of factions features prominently in the responses and branch stacking was broadly linked by many to factionalism. Many members believed that factions did more harm than good and expressed concern in respect of both the secrecy that surrounds factional groups and the power that these groups wield. Members were aware of the stabilising role factional played historically, however, most believed that the current state of factional represented a significant problem that needed to be addressed.

Trade unions

Trade unions have always been a cornerstone of the ALP. Yet the appropriate role for unions within the party has been a vexed issue since the 1970s:

Wyndham Report 1964, 19	The party alienates many unionists by assuming they think the same way as they did twenty years ago. References to 'workers', the 'working class' and the 'underprivileged' are just so much meaningless and sometimes offensive jargon in a modern society.
Hawke Hayden 1979	The issue of the traditional links between the ALP and the trade unions constituted a problem of considerable magnitude...it is also an exceedingly vexed issue. These links have remained formally little altered over time, despite the shift from a provincial to a national society, the revolutions in communications, the great changes in the nature and composition of the workforce and transformation of the trade union movement itself. Yet the unions affiliated with the ALP today are basically the same as those affiliated in the first decade of the century.
Hogg, 1990, p 22	The increasing concentration of power, in the decreasing number of unions, as a result of their desirable restructuring, is likely to compound the problem of lessening open dialog.
Dreyfus 1998, 8.6	The usual rationale advanced for reducing the State conference representation of affiliated unions was that it would improve the Party's electoral prospects, or that it would allow branch members a greater role in Party deliberations and policy formulation. The basis for suggesting that reducing the union delegation would make the ALP more electable is said to be that it would, at least symbolically, reflect an equal partnership between the unions and branch members and reduce a public perception of a union majority and which delivers "control" of the Branch. As far as I can determine the only reason for altering the 60:40 ratio is the perceived symbolism of introducing an equal ratio. The reality of union participation in the Branch is that union delegates to State Conference, and union representatives in other Party forums and bodies, do not vote as a union bloc or seek to impose a combined "union position" on the Party. Branch members already dominate Party deliberations and

	policy formulation, and reducing the union representation to 50% would have little or no effect on Party activity. But if altering the ratio makes the Party more electable it must be further considered.
Bracks, Faulkner Carr 2010	The union movement has undergone a period of profound change over the last 15 years. Australian unions have 'modernised' at a time when the Party has not. Confronting declining membership levels and the election of the Howard Government, Australian unions from 1996 embraced what became known as the 'organising model' over traditional union servicing of members. This organising model restored the democratic role of members within union structures, sought to develop campaigns from the bottom-up, and looked to broader alliances outside of the workplace to build success. It also embraced the need to grow union membership as the fundamental challenge facing the movement. The Australian Labor Party could learn from this experience and the types of organisational and cultural changes it has driven.

Reforms that were taken up

- A committee to consider whether a change in union representation is warranted (Dreyfus 1998)
- Active encouragement and a discounted membership fee for union members (Dreyfus 1998)
- A 50/50 representation of unions at State Conference (Hawke Hayden 2002)
- Union delegate entitlements determined by a 'snapshot' of members (Hawke Hayden 2002)

Reforms that were left on the shelf

- The party establish a recruitment unit staffed by professionals with recruitment expertise (Dreyfus 1998)