

Submission to the Victorian ALP enquiry Administrators Jenny Macklin and Steve Bracks

By James Button

Introduction

I write this submission as the convenor and a founding member of Open Labor, although the views in it, while drawing on Open Labor debates and ideas, are my own. I have been a non-aligned member of the ALP for nine years (Northcote branch), and a delegate to National Conference and State Conference. Open Labor is an organisation of Labor members (in factions and non-aligned) and supporters who work for a more transparent, democratic and open ALP that can elect strong, long-term Labor Governments. Open Labor runs public meetings and a website that seek to promote debate about Labor's future.

At the request of the Administrators, Open Labor supporters Peter Fitzgerald and Fiona McLeod have previously submitted advice on enforcing the party's Secret Ballot provisions and reforming the Disputes Committee respectively. Eric Derricott of the Independents has drawn on his extensive experience as a branch secretary and Administrative Committee member to submit a detailed and compelling package of reform recommendations. Vanessa Williams, Janet McCalman, Rosie Elliott and Dennis Glover are among Open Labor supporters who have made personal submissions to your Review. My submission will not repeat their arguments, nor does it go deeply into the vital issues of stopping branch-stacking and building a more competent State Office. Others have better insights into those issues than me. Instead, I will argue that the ALP should commit to a culture of deep transparency, and why that change would help to repair trust between the party leadership and membership and, most importantly, help to make the party more effective, more ethical, and more electable.

Rather than answer the Administrator's questions I have chosen (after consulting with the Administrators' Review team) to adopt a straightforward narrative, in order to build an argument. I directly address four key questions from the Administrators Discussion Paper at the end of the submission. After making an argument that contains a fair degree of criticism and some frustration, I conclude with a positive proposal for rebuilding trust and strength in our party.

One way that I can speak for Open Labor is in thanking the Administrators, Jenny Macklin and Steve Bracks, for their willingness to take on this difficult task, and for the intelligent, respectful way they have carried it out. They have communicated clearly with members, and held public meetings in which they listened carefully and empathetically to their views. It is such a simple, yet effective, thing to do it is astonishing that our party does it so rarely. The Administrators' approach provides a model for our party as, we hope, it seeks to build a new relationship with and between members based on greater transparency and trust.

Introduction: the vital importance of leadership, as shown by our party's history

Only one major structural reform of a state Labor branch has ever achieved sweeping and successful change – the intervention into the Victorian ALP in 1970-71. That episode holds two vital lessons for the current attempt at reform exactly 50 years later.

First, change would never have happened if Gough Whitlam had not put his leadership on the line to insist on reform of the Victorian branch. Ordinary party members cannot not achieve change alone – not then, not now. Leadership from the top is essential.

Second, after it had intervened in the branch, the National Executive appointed an implementation committee to ensure the reforms were carried through. The committee was made up of insiders who knew the Victorian branch, knew who the enemies of reform were, and drove change through against sometimes ferocious opposition. The reformers knew what was at stake and what the prize was for success. And that is what happened: restructuring the Victorian branch led to an inrush of members and ideas, new policymaking processes that involved party members and supports, all of which led directly to Labor winning power in Australia in 1972 and again in 1983, and in Victoria in 1982, with all the long years of state Labor government that have followed. This may be something for the Administrators to consider as they write their report to the National Executive.

A once proud party in trouble

Widespread branch-stacking was not the only revelation to emerge from the *60 Minutes* expose of the Victorian ALP in July. The program revealed that our party is in trouble. Corrupt practices that should have been stopped years ago were allowed to continue, including by people of integrity and goodwill. People at the top of our party who had known for years about the practices exposed by *60 Minutes* told journalists they had had no idea of their existence. These realities reveal a deep-seated malaise in the party, a culture that has to change if we are to survive.

The Victorian ALP has 16,000 members – 0.24 per cent of the Victorian population and 1 per cent of the people who voted Labor in the last state election. That already tiny membership number will fall, perhaps significantly, if the important anti-branch stacking measures undertaken by the Administrators have bite. The median age of Labor members is 55, compared to 37 for Victorians and Australians in general. The most numerous age group amongst party members is 65 and older. Loss of support amongst our traditional voting base, especially low-income and aspirational groups, was a material factor in the 2019 federal election loss, according to the review of that result conducted by Jay Weatherill and Craig Emerson. We are failing to connect with CALD and Indigenous communities, apart from enlisting members of the former in branch-stacking, and we are grievously failing to appeal to the young. Our membership is older, whiter, more affluent, more fascinated by politics, and, almost certainly, more left-wing than the community at large.

Of course, Labor is not alone in experiencing these problems; the Liberal and National parties have their own version of them, and to some extent they reflect the marginalisation of political engagement and the declining appeal of mainstream parties in our time. But we should not accept this drift as inevitable. With some basic changes, with a sense of urgency

that frankly many of our senior party figures seem not to feel, and with some common sense, we can reverse it, and grow.

For all its flaws, our party has much to celebrate and be proud of. The Andrews Government has been a fine reforming government, and has shown considerable strength and stamina in combatting the coronavirus, despite some well publicised failures. Labor has held power in Victoria for 27 of the past 38 years, after being out of power for 27 years straight before that. With so much time in office, Labor has been able to shape Victoria's culture and direction, to the great benefit of our state. Good people have made it through the Byzantine and often brutal processes we have established to produce state and federal MPs and been effective contributors in parliament.

Finally, anyone who attends a meeting at a lively ALP branch – which is not all branches by any means -- can see that the party is still stocked with idealistic, dedicated and decent members. In the past month, Open Labor representatives have spoken at the Melbourne FEA, and at Flinders, Northcote, Manningham and Upwey Foothills branches, as well as in two Open Labor Zoom meetings that attracted a total of 450 people. We have been struck by the loyalty members still feel for the party, despite the deep frustration of many at its behaviour, especially today.

[Dysfunctional party operation, disenfranchised members](#)

So much of our party's operation has become at best dysfunctional and geared to the interests of small groups of people. State Office makes no attempt to welcome new members or sustain old ones, and give either group a sense of what their rights and obligations are in joining the ALP. People who leave the party are never contacted and asked why, unless it is by an entrepreneurial branch (this year Kyneton Branch contacted 73 people whose memberships were about to lapse and persuaded them all to renew). Stories of people trying and failing to join the party are legion – in a party that claims to want members. Our official website is a dead zone that hosts no debates, gives no guidance on how to be an effective member, and offers no forums to engage and encourage party members and supporters. State Office provides no support or training in how to run an effective, welcoming branch. Click on the Branch Resources tab and you will find six pdfs for applications, transfers and elected branch positions, nothing else.

Meetings of the Administrative Committee, our chief executive body, often start hours late because of pre-meeting factional caucuses, then run deep into the night, with decisions regularly deferred even then. Members of the committee are usually not provided with vital papers before the meeting. Half the members regularly don't even show up, and instead appoint proxies, often younger factional operatives who spend their time on the phone getting directions about how they should vote from elected committee members, who presumably are at home watching their box sets of *The Sopranos*.

One stark fact: Independent Eric Dearth says that in his 20 years on the Administrative Committee, party officials have *never once* reported to the committee statistics of how many members the Victorian branch has, how many joined in the previous year, how many resigned or lapsed, the gender, age, ethnic or geographic mix. This would be unheard of in

any other organisation that purports to represent and look after its members. Since we live in a time when data has never been easier to access, collect and analyse, this cannot be mere incompetence – it suggests that senior figures in the party administration are wilfully ignorant of what is happening amongst the membership, and indeed the Administrative Committee has never requested the data.

Yet there is so much the party could do with proper membership information. Where is the number of members growing, where declining, and in what demographics and groups? Is there a relationship between these figures and our vote in state and federal elections in these seats? If we know where the party is healthy, we can investigate the successful strategies of those branches, and share them with other party branches and members. If we know where it is declining, we can take action there.

But is it too cynical to ask whether the idea of a growing party appeals at all too many of the current holders of power within it? Blaming a cock-up over a conspiracy is a good rule in life but it is seriously challenged here. For example, Victorian Labor started the Community Action Network to build dedicated teams of local activists and organisers to target and win state and federal seats. The policy was a big success, bringing many energetic and idealistic young people into the party's orbit and contributing to the election and re-election of the Andrews Government, and to winning marginal seats like the federal electorates of Dunkley and Corangamite. Yet once the CAN was established, at no stage were its members invited to join the party. The Administrative Committee has never once received a report on the operations of the CAN, despite its importance to Labor's on-the-ground election campaigns and despite the desperate need to bring in young members. Indeed, a former factional leader told me there was an unspoken decision to *discourage* them from joining. This is the zero-sum game of factional warfare: an influx of new members from one faction means the other loses, so both prefer to leave things as they are. This is both cock-up *and* conspiracy. The factions win, but the party loses.

Finally, it is now virtually impossible to get change through State Conference, our primary governing body, because if one faction doesn't like a proposal it simply withdraws its delegates from the conference floor, thereby preventing the quorum needed for a change to the party rules. Unlike other states, the Victorian ALP has denied its members a say in the preselection of Senate candidates since the Split of 1955. The Left and non-aligned groups have campaigned to change this rule for years. But at the 2017 State Conference, Right delegates defeated a move to give ordinary members 50 per cent of the vote for Senate candidates by staying out of the hall. At last year's Conference, the Right – supported by a breakaway group from the Left – shut down debate on the issue and shunted it off to the Rules Revision Committee for further refinement, where it was never heard of again. The two delegates who moved to squash debate did not even bother to speak to their motion. In other words, the conference could not even debate the lack of debate. Once again, one faction held onto power and the party lost.

Factions: the Good, the Bad and the Ugly

There is nothing wrong with factions in principle. Political parties are sites of contest and argument, and it makes perfect sense for people to come together and organise around

shared goals. But with the possible exception of economic policy, the differences in ideas between the two main factions, which were quite pronounced 30 years ago, are now vanishingly small. Today's factions are above all vehicles for patronage and personal advancement. Both contain people of integrity, people who would like to see a more democratic party and ordinary members who simply want to debate ideas and help to elect Labor governments, but nearly all the Right and Left members active in internal party operations are locked into a rigid factional logic that produces documents such as the Stability Pact.

If ever there was a document that revealed the operational culture of contemporary Labor, and the gulf between party operators and ordinary members, it is the Stability Pact. The document, first drawn up in 2009 (and now up for renewal, it is rumoured, in the wake of the Somyurek revelations and appointment of the Administrators) divides up nearly every winnable federal and state seat and party post, every plum of power, between the two factions. The agreement largely makes a mockery of internal elections. While ordinary members in theory get half the votes to select their candidate for lower house seats, in effect they have no power, since the other half of votes is controlled by the two factions working together on the POSC under the dictates of the Stability Pact. Yet this pact, so crucial to the everyday workings of the party, is largely unknown to members. At a recent Open Labor meeting, a politically informed academic who belongs to the Socialist Left and has been a member of the party for 20 years, said he had no idea until recently that the Stability Pact even existed. The document is the Da Vinci Code of the Victorian ALP's Vatican culture.

It also points to the great divide of our contemporary party. On one hand, a numerically small but supremely dominant factional elite; on the other, the ordinary members, some of whom are in factions but at least half of whom are non-aligned on reliable estimates, and who have no idea -- because they are given no idea -- how the party operates. If the commoners outside the castle walls shout sometimes, it is because we have no confidence anyone in the banquet hall is listening. At the same time, *no senior figure* in our party (with one exception, which I'll come to later), argues against democratic reform. Everyone pays lip service to it. Senior figures write chapters about it in their memoirs (Greg Combet) or head reviews to make it happen (Bob Hawke and Neville Wran). Bill Shorten, soon after becoming party leader, devoted a headland speech to it, arguing that Labor nationally could become a party of 100,000 members, but only if it became more democratic. It was a good speech, built on a vision of "a Labor party that's stronger because we have more members and those members have more of a say."

Yet Shorten subsequently did nothing to advance the reform agenda he had set out in detail in that speech. Even worse, when the 2015 National Conference debated what Shorten identified as a signature reform – ensuring that all members had 50 per cent of the vote for Senators – the leader was not even in the room, only taking the floor minutes after the motion had been shelved once again. No wonder some ordinary members are cynical about the gulf between the words and deeds of some of our senior figures.

Not all members care about internal party reform: many join to be part of a movement or their community, support Labor and help elect ALP Governments. But there are many who want more say, or at the very least more sense that the party is prepared to tell them what is going on, and sees a role for them. As one ordinary member put it to the Bracks, Carr, Faulkner national review of the party in 2010: “There is a huge rift, a massive divide between rank and file members and the leadership who show them very little respect.”

Understanding how our party functions and fails to function, understanding that the two main factions (and their various sub-factions) are locked into winner-take-all battles that effectively shut out ordinary members, can lead to only one conclusion. Meaningful structural change that would make the party an effective and welcoming organisation is now virtually impossible unless senior figures in both factions drive it through. It is not at all clear that the existing structures in the party make change possible, even if 80 percent of members were outside the Docklands office demanding it. Leadership of the reform agenda must come from the top. Not from Daniel Andrews – though his voice supporting reform could be decisive – but from leaders in both factions who can work others in the party, including people who are not aligned, to drive through change, sometimes brutally if necessary.

So are we at a point where senior figures in the party – factional leaders -- think the situation is so dire that the imperative to change is greater than the imperative to maintain the status quo, with all the benefits it has brought to them? This is a defining question for the National Executive, and for the party leadership in Victoria. My pessimistic view is that despite all the protestations of shock about the Somyurek revelations, that time has not yet come.

Challenge for members: their role in electing Labor governments

The current reform process also poses questions for the ordinary members (including me) who are calling loudly for party reform. The Labor Party exists, above anything else, to ensure the election and re-election of Labor governments, who are made up of capable MPs implementing Labor policies and values, thereby changing our state and nation. Labor exists to help build a fairer, more decent and equal society, on a planet we can all live on.

And not all democratic party reform is unquestionably for the good, as the British Labour Party painfully discovered when the membership (admittedly reshaped by a naïve process that allowed all new members to vote virtually on joining) chose Jeremy Corbyn as leader. What, then, is the relationship between greater party democracy and electing strong Labor governments? The reform movement must address this question. Merely adopting a position of moral outrage at the exclusion of ordinary members from decision-making within the party will not get us very far. The voters come ahead of us every time and party leaders and officials may sometimes make decisions on that basis, or at least say they do. Would-be reformers have to show how democratic reforms – and in particular, which ones – would create a stronger and more electable party. We have to acknowledge that the views of the typical party member do not necessarily align with the views of the Victorian or Australian public. In the main, we are almost certainly more left-wing than they are.

All that said, here are three reasons why a more open, democratic party would be a more electorally effective party.

More locally active members leads to electoral success

First, attracting a larger number of ordinary members can improve a party's electoral fortunes. The Bracks, Carr, Faulkner review found: "A strong, well organised branch membership undoubtedly contributes to electoral success. We are in fact seeing a return to the importance of the 'local' in campaigning as voters become more desensitised to mass advertising, more diverse in their social interactions and more exposed to competing political viewpoints." Former Chisholm MP Anna Burke told an Open Labor meeting last month that she would not have held the marginal federal seat for 18 years if she had not had an active group of members on the ground – not just to walk the streets and staff polling booths and phone banks at election time but, at other times, to run stalls at public events, hold debates, be active in local government and establish a Labor presence and sense of energy in the electorate.

Moreover, the CAN, for all its success, cannot be relied upon to faithfully turn out activists year after year. Labor, as a party that seeks to win and exercise power, has years of feast and famine with the public, times it is liked, times it is despised. For every 1972 or 1999, there is a 2010, when ordinary voters look at our how-to-vote cards at the booth and look away. Yet even in those years, ordinary members of the party show up. And how many more would show up if they had been welcomed, trained, and engaged by our party in what it means to be a Labor member.

Preselecting stronger Labor candidates

The second reason for reform is that it is by no means clear that our processes are picking the best people for federal and state parliament. The factional culture arguably makes the party weaker. From their earliest days as student operatives, factional players are schooled in how to do backroom deals, in the machinery of factional intrigue, none of which is visible to ordinary members. One day the lucky few get their reward and are bumped into parliament, often through a murky process. Once there, they have to argue a case before the public, but nothing in the party's culture has prepared them for this. They have not participated in contested policy debates at party conferences, as was once the case. Too many serve out their days sitting quietly on the back bench, preserving factional strength but doing not much else.

This is most evident in the way we pick Senate candidates in Victoria. The Senate should be home to Labor's finest policy minds, people who are not necessarily comfortable with the relentless, public-facing requirements of a lower house MP, but who are skilled in analysing a policy and making an argument for it. Yet with the shining exception of Penny Wong and a few others, the calibre of Labor's senators in recent years has not been high. In many states, Senate seats have become a reward for factional or union loyalty. In Victoria, they are chosen by the Public Office Selection Committee (POSC) under the dictates of the Stability Pact. In other words, there is no contest, no line of sight for members of the person who will

represent them for at least six years, only a decision made through a deal behind closed doors and formally ratified by the POSC, an elected body carrying out an irrelevant task.

Bringing people who represent their communities into politics

Even in these times when politics is run by a professional class, we cannot give up on building a membership based on a representative sample of the public, ordinary people from all walks of life, some of whom might become our local councillors and state and federal MPs -- people who, unlike the political class in most cases, can comfortably speak for their community because they are embedded in it.

I think these three arguments for party reform are strong. But perhaps there are legitimate counter arguments. Perhaps tight factional control is the only way to manage the vicious disputes that always break out inside political parties. Maybe pro-democracy members are being romantic in their belief that people will rush to join the party if only it were more democratic. Maybe the link between greater internal democracy and electoral success is not as clear as reformers might think. Whatever these counter arguments might be, people who hold them should state them and stand by them. Party members – leaders, factional operators, rank and file -- should argue over these issues, because they may go to vital tensions between democracy and efficiency, and what weight to give to each in the interests of ensuring the election of Labor governments. We have an opportunity to renew ourselves as a party of open debate and information. We should commit to a culture of transparency. Far from causing deeper divisions, let alone damaging ourselves in the eyes of the public (most of whom are paying no attention), I believe this change has the potential to bring ordinary members much more deeply into the party and help to rebuild a culture of trust between them and at least some key sections of the party leadership.

Rebuilding trust based on a culture of transparency

A practice and a culture of transparency could have many dimensions. Here are just a few concrete recommendations, followed by discussion of some deeper issues around transparency. Allowing for its financial capacity, the party should:

- Provide regular, transparent and truthful communications to members about what the party is doing, and how members can become more involved.
- Provide a welcoming pack to new members, and a phone call from State Office upon joining.
- Undertake regular surveys of members' views and analyse and publish their responses.
- Run an informative website that provides contact details and meeting times of all branches and information about policy committees.
- Communicate regularly with branch secretaries and train them in how to run an effective, welcoming branch (and consider sanctions on branch secretaries who fail to do so).
- Hold an annual general meeting and invite all members to attend, and express their views and question the party leadership. If the Geelong Football Club does this, the ALP can too.

- Require all candidates for any seat or party position, including delegates to Conferences, to declare their factional allegiance.
- Allow ordinary members to observe Administrative Committee meetings, with no speaking rights, and with carve-outs for sensitive discussions such as campaign strategy and party finances.
- Ban proxies from Administration Committee meetings.
- Appoint state office officials and staff based on merit, not faction, and ban them from engaging in factional activities in worktime.

How transparency helps address tough issues

Creating a culture of transparency should go even further than these recommendations. We need to commit to publicly addressing some sensitive aspects of our party culture and operations. I set out two here:

1. The role of factions

The ALP is said to be the most factionalised labour or social democratic party in the world. According to federal frontbencher Mark Butler in a 2018 speech, it also “gives ordinary members fewer rights than any other Labor or Social Democratic Party I can think of.” For the foreseeable future, factions are likely to play a dominant role in our party’s decision-making. But because they have no formal standing in our party, they are not accountable. They need to be. For example, it is a rank insult to members that the Stability Pact, such a defining document in the operations of our party, is not available for members to view. I have heard factional members say that the Stability Pact exists to end the vicious inter- and intra-factional infighting that dominated the party before 2009. I don’t support this argument but it is a legitimate one. So put it out there. If the factions genuinely believe this is a fit and proper way to run the party, they should publish the Stability Pact on a website, with an explanation of why it is needed. Let’s commit to having our arguments in public.

I support the argument made in a submission by five Carlton North branch members -- Ken Gardner, Carolyn Watts, Cathy Wilson, Brian Knight and Tony Dalton – that a broader process needs to be established to make factions accountable. They write: “It is important to acknowledge the existence of the factions and ensure they are part of the reform process following this review. Why should they endorse change that will reduce their influence? We are not arguing that the factions should be prohibited. At one level factions do represent divergent views about directions for the party and policy. Differences in ideas are legitimate along with the groups that form around them. Instead the Administrators are encouraged to require their participation in governance reform that moderates their power.”

This governance reform would “require any group within the party with formalised membership arrangements to engage in good faith with a regular review process.” The reviewers would be a panel of respected party members who have no interest in becoming office bearers or parliamentary candidates. The Carlton North members proposed that factions would report against formal terms of reference covering such areas as membership, inter-factional agreements, processes used to select candidates for internal party positions and parliamentary candidates, formal agreements with unions, finance and budget and factional governance. I would add that factions could also report against their work to

generate ideas and debate within the party, through public meetings and articles, among other possible measures. The submission finds that “over time this type of accountability to the party has the potential to stimulate members to demand changes in culture and practices of the factions.”

2. The role of unions

Affiliated trade unions comprise 50 per cent of Victoria’s State (and National) Conference delegates. Their factionalised leadership regularly supplies candidates for state and federal parliament. They hold immense power in our party. Yet their role inside the party is rarely discussed – and indeed the Administrators’ Discussion Paper does not discuss it. As an Upwey Branch member said in a recent meeting, “the unions are the third rail of ALP politics.”

Most Open Labor supporters believe that the party needs to maintain its union connection. The relationship of unions and the party goes back to day one of the party. Unions make a decisive financial contribution to party funds. Even more importantly, without its million affiliated trade unionists across Australia, Labor’s connection to working people would be much weaker; it would risk becoming a party dominated by the inner-city middle class. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to ask whether it is democratic that affiliated unions that comprise less than 10 per cent of the workforce have 50 per cent of the vote in the party, especially when that vote is not exercised democratically.

On balance, Open Labor believes that the party should not weaken the union connection but strengthen it by democratising it, growing the party in the process. It supports exploring the option, proposed recently by National Union of Workers National Secretary Tim Kennedy, to give individual affiliated unionists party membership and a vote in party forums (Greg Combet proposed a similar model in his 2013 memoir). In return, the trade-off over time would be that trade union secretaries exercise less power – including by giving up their right to collect ballots and control bloc votes at party conferences – as their members exercise more. These ideas are provisional at this stage, but the party needs to publicly debate them. Once again, we need to commit to a culture of transparency.

How transparency can build a stronger party

Transparency is a powerful discipline, for two big reasons. First, it is a very effective hedge against bad behaviour. In journalism there is a thing called the front page rule. It means: if you are about to do or publish something that you are not sure about ethically, ask yourself, ‘How would I feel if this was discussed on the front page of The Age?’ If you don’t think you’d feel good if it were, don’t do it. If you don’t believe you can publicly justify the Stability Pact, don’t sign it.

Second, commitment to public debate makes a party strong, not weak. It forces party members who seek public office to stand up for their views, even when they are unpopular. In that way it prepares them for public life, including the bear pits of parliament, talkback radio, Q&A – all the places where our MPs and leaders have to learn to make a case. Bob Hawke once defined politics as “communication and the persuasion of other people to your

point of view.” For its own survival, our party has to renew its commitment to these core arts of politics.

Third, the party officials and factional leaders who prefer to act in shadow might well find that members are more accommodating of their positions than they realise. For example, a state secretary with limited financial resources might be faced with a choice between upgrading the party’s website and investing in polling and campaigning in two key marginal seats – and decide on the latter. Such trade-offs are natural in politics, and it is absurd to think that party members would not accept them if they were explained clearly and honestly. This is the trust-building that transparency can achieve.

Finally, greater transparency could also help the factions to renew themselves intellectually. This is a particular challenge for the Right, which of the two main factions seems most opposed to democratic party reform. Some on the Right privately claim that they stack because if they don’t, the left’s greater strength among ordinary members will enable it to take over the party. This is questionable, but it goes to a larger – and again largely unspoken – issue in the party. In 2018 a Fairfax journalist reported right-wing Senator Kimberley Kitching as saying she opposed giving rank-and-file members a say on the grounds it could drive the party too far to the left and make it unelectable. Kitching at least deserves credit for candour. And she is right that the party will be unelectable if it swings too far left. But I think she is dead wrong that the way to do this is to deprive ordinary members of a voice in the operation of their party. Crucial debates about striking a balance between principle and the need to win power must happen openly. Indeed, in an ideal world, far from the one that exists today, they offer an opportunity for the Right to reinvent its ideas base by measuring Labor ideas and policies against their likely appeal to voters – as the writing of Nick Dyrenfurth, a former speechwriter to Bill Shorten, has done.

The vision is a party of two main factions held in tension based on a contest of ideas, with a non-aligned group, representing the large number of ordinary members not involved in factions, having a role in party operations and even holding the balance of power. We are a long way from this now, but it is something to aspire to. The aspiration could drive recruitment based on ordinary members and prospective members having a clear sense of where they might fit into the party ecosystem, what roles, rights and responsibilities they might have as Labor members. The Administrators cannot wave a magic wand to achieve these changes. But their advice to the National Executive can begin to put in place the rules and culture changes that will set the party on the path to greater organisational integrity, effectiveness and electability.

Three specific issues for the Administrators to consider based on their Discussion Paper questions

Question 3.1: Is the current branch structure fit for purpose in 2020 and beyond? Are there viable alternatives?

This is a difficult question to resolve. Within Open Labor, for example, there are different views. Some branches are unwelcoming to both old and new members, run boring meetings, and are particularly off putting to young people. Other branches are lively,

embedded in their communities, with a strong component of friendship and esprit de corps. These branches feel strongly that they wish to retain their current structure, and that if the party forces them to amalgamate into super branches they will lose their appeal, and the party might well lose members as a result. The complexity and potential risk associated with this issue suggests that before opting for wholesale change, the party should adopt modern organisational best practice and trial some options, then evaluate the results. Some state electorates that were willing to do so could be invited to form super branches, and a panel of party members could investigate their success in creating a lively, open forum and attracting and retaining members. While the trial took place, over at least a year, the party should resource both super and regular branches equally, and hold a sustained and open discussion on branch structure via online forums and member electronic surveys. Only then would the party be in a position to make an informed decision based on proper member engagement.

Question 5.1 – Should we introduce a renewed Administrative Committee that provides the governance oversight? Should the Committee and related Sub-committees be reduced in size to reflect contemporary governance practice?

There is a case for exploring a smaller Administrative Committee, but the number of members should fall to no lower than 20. Moreover, the party should consider direct election for these positions, to ensure they represent the widest possible range of ordinary member views. Reducing the Administrative Committee numbers to 10, as some have proposed, would impose an unrealistic load on committee members, especially as for good governance it makes sense to ask them to also serve on important subsidiary committees such as the Membership and Administration or Campaign Committees. Even more importantly, a committee of 10 – unless it was elected by direct election -- would ensure that non-aligned members had no chance of being represented on the party's most important decision-making body. This would make the party more monocultural, and weaker.

Question 6.2 – Could changes be made to local votes for preselection?

As a first step, giving ordinary members a say in Senate preselections would improve the calibre of our Senators. The popular vote, being statewide, could not be stacked. It would increase party transparency by forcing candidates to campaign publicly on their principles and positions – what they stand for, why they are Labor, why they are suited for public office. It would give Labor supporters a good reason to join the party. While some proposed democratic reforms are more complex and uncertain in their outcomes, and therefore need more debate, this one seems to be a no-regrets proposal to both strengthen the party and build the engagement and trust of our membership.

A proposal to rebuild trust within our party

If this submission sounds exasperated at times, it is because it reflects the frustration many ordinary members feel at being excluded from the party's decision-making processes. Yet the lack of trust seems to run both ways. To generalise, on the one hand the membership does not trust the organisational and factional leaders to speak honestly about their actions and motives. On the other hand, the leadership seems to not trust the membership to play a decisive role in helping it to deliver government – as witnessed, among other acts, by the creation of the CAN network. Moreover, there is almost no dialogue between the two groups about the reform agenda: which reforms are practical, sensible and affordable and which are not, and how the many proposals for reform might come together in an integrated, compelling package.

As this submission makes clear, greater transparency is not only an effective discipline for strengthening a party that lives or dies on the power of its arguments, it can also build greater trust. However, the party also needs a mechanism by which it can move to a more open and transparent – and I hope democratic – framework.

At the 2018 National Conference Open Labor and the Independents proposed creating a Forum for Party Growth and Democracy. This would be a body largely made up of elected members and affiliated trade unionists, but also containing a small number of MPs, who would be empowered to focus on ideas for how to grow the party and open it to a wider membership. The goal was to take potentially good ideas outside of the arenas of National and State Conference, where they get no chance to be debated, let alone adopted, before they are killed in the crossfire of factional conflicts. The idea won support from senior figures in both main factions -- including then leader Bill Shorten – although the Right faction insisted that the name of the body be Forum for Party Growth and Engagement, a change the Left and non-aligned delegates accepted.

The Forum might be a way through which good ideas might be proposed, selected, developed, trialled then evaluated – a process that is best practice in any contemporary organisation. Ideas might include, among many:

- How to give more say to members to preselect candidates while ensuring that the party centre retains a role in preselections in some circumstances
- How to better train aspiring MPs and public office holders, perhaps through greater investment in the Labor Academy
- Ideas for rebuilding the party's ties to working-class, disadvantaged and aspirational communities, and to attracting the young
- Proposals to give ordinary union members party membership and a vote in ALP forums in return for an end to bloc votes wielded by union secretaries.

If such a Forum (or similar) were adopted, it would be critical that its members be directly elected from the wider party membership, to ensure that they reflected as closely as possible the different views and positions of ALP members.

The party should also consider creating a recruitment unit – recommended by the 1998 Dreyfus Party Review – or a recruitment director, recommended by the 2011 Bracks, Carr, Faulkner Review. Critically, this unit or position would have to be non-factional – meaning that any factional person appointed to the unit or role would have to commit to renouncing their factional interests for the duration of the appointment, and to working to recruit members from any faction or none.

Finally, while the Review will rightly focus on governance matters, I want to propose that we give some thought to a broader vision of what a more 'co-designed' party membership might look like. 'Co-design' is a vague term, but it captures the principle that party members could and should be able to contribute their skills, expertise and ideas to activities or events that interest or inspire them.

One way to think of co-design is to understand what promotes loyalty in a membership-based organisation. At its simplest, such an approach calls for good data about existing and potential members: their demographic characteristics, including work and family commitments, time use and opportunities to engage, as well as their reasons to join and participate. Good member-based organisations learn from and engage with their members, using their ideas, contributions and expertise. New communication platforms and ways to gather and use data are making such an approach increasingly affordable and feasible.

The Labor Party has a diverse membership, and the party could unlock considerable value by mobilising its potential contributions. This might mean inviting people's ideas about fundraising and social entrepreneurship, communications and customer relations, entertainment and event management. The party could do a skills audit of its members. Many are retired, with time on their hands and much expertise to contribute, and in many cases would be honoured to be asked to offer it. Others have professional experience and expertise in government, public service, trade unions and business. Could Labor create a kind of open platform for Labor members to connect through such conversations and strengthen our party as a result?

In government Labor has promised to design and deliver social services by working *with* citizens, not doing things *for* or *to* them. Could we take this fundamental principle of human-centred design and apply it to understanding the attitudes, motivations and potential contributions of our own Labor members? We'd be a stronger and more appealing party if we did.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission.