

Queensland vote-rigging inquiry reveals:

The rotting structures of the Australian Labor Party

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Bitter factional brawling over parliamentary careers, influence, prestige and privilege has long been one of the main characteristics of life in the Australian Labor Party (ALP). So has “branch stacking”, the practice of fraudulently boosting the number of supporters of one candidate over another by falsifying party membership lists and rigging internal pre-selection ballots.

But in the north-eastern state of Queensland, what used to be confined to inner party manoeuvring has spilled over into acts of criminal electoral fraud, opening the door wide open for the police and the courts to step in. The ensuing crisis has plunged the party into turmoil, threatening to bring down the Queensland Labor government before year's end.

Last Wednesday, ALP witnesses to a Queensland Criminal Justice Commission (CJC) inquiry, headed by retired Supreme Court judge Tom Shepherdson, named three state Labor MPs and one senior party bureaucrat as being involved in electoral fraud. Two federal MPs, one backbencher and one frontbencher, whose identities have so far been suppressed, were also named.

On the same day, the Queensland Labor government deputy Premier Jim Elder abruptly announced his resignation, after revealing that the CJC was investigating members of his family. Somewhat ironically, Elder is parliamentary leader of the notorious right wing Australian Workers Union (AWU) faction that dominates the Queensland party, reputedly with an iron fist. The AWU faction is responsible for initiating the sordid chain of events that sparked the inquiry in the first place.

In response to the allegations, Labor Premier Peter Beattie rushed back to Australia, cutting short a trade mission to Asia. With his government holding a slim one-seat majority in the state parliament, Beattie told ABC radio that, due to “a range of circumstances some of which I will not control,” he could be forced to call an early election.

Yesterday he replaced Elder as his deputy, and called on the federal party to intervene to “clean up” the state branch. Federal Opposition leader Kim Beazley seems keen to oblige. The ALP faces a federal election in 2001, with all the pundits pointing to several marginal seats in Queensland as crucial to Labor's chances of wresting victory from the Howard Liberal government.

Moreover, Beazley belongs to the ALP's national right wing faction that is closely aligned with the Queensland AWU. One of his most influential advisers is AWU faction heavyweight Wayne Swan, a former Queensland ALP secretary and federal Labor frontbencher. With prime minister Howard threatening to name in federal parliament the federal frontbench MP allegedly involved in the rotting scandal, Beazley's efforts up to now to ignore the matter appear to be doomed.

The CJC commissioned the Shepherdson inquiry in September 2000 after ALP member Karen Ehrmann was convicted on 47 counts of falsifying the Commonwealth electoral roll. Ehrmann was found to have

submitted forged electoral enrolment forms in order to stack party branches during pre-selection ballots for Labor candidates in local and state government elections in 1993, 1994 and 1996.

Significantly, the purpose of the enrolment scam was not to boost Labor's votes against its electoral opponents in the Liberal and National parties. It was to augment the AWU faction's numbers in inner party contests with its factional rivals. (ALP members must be on the electoral roll of the electorate in question before they can vote in party pre-selection ballots.)

Ehrmann was sentenced by the Townsville District Court in northern Queensland to three years jail on August 11, with a minimum prison term of nine months—the first person to be jailed in Australia for electoral fraud.

It turns out, however, that she was just a small cog in a very large machine.

In 1996, Karen Ehrmann was a Townsville city councillor. Keen to further her career in state politics, she decided to stand for pre-selection for the nearby electorate of Thuringowa. As the AWU faction's candidate, she comfortably won the ballot. But, according to an investigation by ABC television's *Four Corners*, screened on October 30, Ehrmann's opponent, Electrical Trades Union organiser Terry Gillman, uncovered widespread fraud in the course of the contest. He found that Labor Party members who had been registered on the electoral roll in Thuringowa were simply unknown at their registered addresses. They had been “parachuted” into the electorate, at false addresses, in order to bolster Ehrmann's numbers and deliver her victory.

Gillman told *Four Corners* that he took his complaint to the party's Disputes Tribunal but it was swept under the carpet. Former AWU factional organiser, Lee Bermingham, widely known as the “rotts mastermind”, admitted that this was because the Tribunal was “controlled by the AWU”.

Two years earlier, a Townsville ALP returning officer had raised concerns over the vote-rigging activities of Ehrmann and fellow AWU faction member Shane Foster in an internal ALP ballot. These had also been buried by the party hierarchy.

It was only when Ehrmann, because of personal animosities, switched her allegiance from Tony Mooney, the AWU's candidate for pre-selection in the neighbouring safe Labor seat of Townsville, to Mike Reynolds, the rival “Left” faction's candidate, that things began to get nasty for her.

The AWU faction regarded her defection as an act of treason. At her trial, Ehrmann said she received threats from them that she would be “destroyed politically and publicly and they certainly kept their word”.

Four Corners revealed that Mark Petria, secretary of a Townsville ALP branch and member of the AWU faction, leaked documents relating to Ehrmann's vote-rigging exploits to a Liberal official in Townsville. The police were brought in and two months later Ehrmann was charged. After

two years fighting the allegations, she eventually pleaded guilty.

But as a payback to her former factional colleagues, Ehrmann lodged an affidavit during the trial, claiming that she was simply a “bit player in a well-known scheme being carried out by the AWU long before I was involved.”

“I was not a person with any power or great position and I was, most of the time, bullied and pressured by people in a position of power.”

Ehrmann alleged that just prior to sentencing, she was telephoned by an AWU faction member and offered a hefty bribe to change her story and implicate the “Left.”

She refused. Interestingly enough, two other Townsville AWU factional identities, Shane Foster and Andy Kehoe, had earlier been convicted of electoral fraud for manipulating the electoral roll in 1996 to benefit Tony Mooney. In one instance, for example, the membership of the Magnetic Island branch leapt overnight from 24 to 93. In another, Kehoe was seen furiously signing up new ALP members at his Townsville petrol station.

While both Foster and Kehoe, who remained loyal to the AWU to the end, received suspended sentences, Ehrmann went to prison.

Ehrmann's trial affidavit created a furore in Queensland's parliament, prompting further state intervention. The CJC set up the Shepherdson public inquiry with a brief to investigate the ALP's handling of pre-selection ballots throughout Queensland between 1993 and 1997, as well as specific instances in the Townsville electorate and in the state capital Brisbane's City Council wards.

In hearings that began on October 4, one witness after another testified to endemic corruption, coercion and intimidation by factional bosses, branch stacking, the interception of Electoral Office mail and vote rigging.

Ehrmann told the inquiry that the ALP had an “insider” in the Electoral Commission whose job it was to obtain documents to fraudulently enrol party members. Some 20 to 25 “floating voters” would sign up at bogus addresses in different electorates to support the AWU's candidates.

Shane Foster claimed that the “Left's” Mike Reynolds, now MP for Townsville and parliamentary secretary to Premier Beattie, was involved in a vote-rigging system in Townsville in 1996.

Andrew Kehoe, described by Ehrmann as Mooney's “numbers man”, claimed that Mooney had helped him falsify the electoral roll in 1996.

A number of former student organisers for the party described being bullied and threatened into forging electoral enrolments by senior party figures. “[Y]ou would be looked after in relation to jobs if you did what you were told,” explained Rodney Mudford, former State president of the National Union of Students. “If you didn't do what you were told there would be repercussions.”

Former Queensland Labor adviser and government researcher, Shaun Rohrlach, wept as he recounted being threatened by Lee Bermingham and his offsider, Warwick Powell, after refusing to enrol in a Brisbane City Council ward, later won by Bermingham's sister.

Bermingham, a key figure in the allegations, gave evidence at a secret hearing on October 20. “Bermingham now sends shudders through the Labor Party hierarchy,” declared Brisbane's *Courier-Mail* on October 14. “If anyone knows where the bodies are buried it is Bermingham. According to many witnesses at the inquiry Bermingham did much of the spadework”.

He is due to give testimony publicly before the inquiry this week.

In 1997, Bermingham fell out with the AWU and was sacked as Labor Party organizer. He told *Four Corners* that the AWU would “artificially inflate” their figures to affiliate with the ALP. “Obviously, the more numbers you have the more delegates you get... therefore the more influence you can have inside the Labor Party”. Many of the AWU members were “people who have worked for one day or one week for them... fruit pickers, people like that in casual employment.” According to Bermingham the AWU had a “slush fund” to pay for party memberships in areas the faction considered important.

Bermingham went on to describe something of the internal life of the ALP.

There had been “a lot of bitterness and hatred [in the Labor Party] for many, many years,” he said, and low morale had made it difficult to campaign in Townsville.

“If you're a branch member in a particular area and you've been active... year in and year out, and then all of a sudden... somebody else is able to come in and put on numbers, and... they're paid for from a slush fund, I think... a lot of people start to feel disenfranchised and less inclined to work on campaigns.”

More than a century ago, Queensland was the launching pad for the Labor party. The bitter defeat of a series of powerful strikes by shearers in 1890-91 propelled the unions to build their own political party, aimed at putting representatives of the labor movement into parliament. The first four Labor members were elected to the Queensland parliament in 1892, and the world's first Labor government came to office briefly in 1899.

But from its inception, the Labor party was wedded to the capitalist profit system. Its perspective was reform, not revolution; class collaboration, not socialism. As the first national political party, it was organically integrated into the very functioning of the nation state.

Zinoviev, one of the leaders of the Bolshevik party in Russia, accurately summed up the character of the ALP in 1914: “...Upon the backs of the labouring masses there arises, one after the other, little bands of aristocrats of labour, from the midst of which the future Labor Party ministers spring forth, ready to do loyal service to the bourgeoisie... The Labor party as such comes to the surface only during parliamentary elections. Once the elections are over the party disappears again for three whole years. The party conventions are conventions only of party functionaries. They are not in any sense composed of any representatives of the mass of labour.”

Nearly a century on, the mass tide of working class support for Labor has run its course, leaving nothing much more than a murky swamp of self-seeking careerists and their bureaucratic thugs.

The experience of the past two decades—13 years of Labor in government blazing the trail of deregulation, privatisation, job cutting, the destruction of social infrastructure, attacks on welfare and the underprivileged, and four years of Labor in opposition providing bipartisan support for the gutting of welfare, public health and public education—has served to openly demonstrate the fundamentally anti-working class character of Labor's program and perspective.

The activities being brought to light in the Shepherdson inquiry provide an inkling of the sordid and profoundly undemocratic state of affairs this program has wrought within the Labor party as a whole.



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