

Australian Labor mired in leadership turmoil

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Eighteen months after its third consecutive federal election defeat, the opposition Australian Labor Party is embroiled in a squalid leadership row. The conflict is symptomatic of a deep-going and terminal malaise within the party once considered to be the “natural home” of the working class.

Next Monday, following months of internal conflict, the 92 members of the federal ALP will cast their votes in a leadership ballot to choose between former leader Kim Beazley and the present incumbent Simon Crean. Called by Crean to end a white-anting campaign by Beazley’s supporters, it is doubtful that the ballot will resolve the issue. Unless Crean wins by an overwhelming majority, another challenge is likely in the months ahead.

Neither man has had to contest the leadership before. Following Labor’s humiliating defeat under former Prime Minister Paul Keating in the 1996 election, Beazley was installed as leader with the agreement of all the party’s factions. He stepped down after leading the party to defeat at the 1998 and 2001 elections, and Crean was put in—again, with the support of the factions.

But rumblings intensified throughout 2002 as Labor failed to make any inroads against the government. While Howard enlisted in Bush’s “war on terror” and the war in Afghanistan, Crean’s main pre-occupation was internal party “reform”—i.e., breaking the hold of the factions and supposedly making the party more democratic. His actions did nothing to halt the decline in membership or provide any lift in the closely watched opinion polls.

The collapse of support for the ALP was thrown into sharper focus by the rapid growth of widespread opposition to the US-led war against Iraq and the Howard government’s commitment of Australian forces. Despite the largest antiwar demonstrations in Australian history, the ALP’s standing went from bad to worse. It was seen as completely irrelevant, or viewed with downright hostility—as evidenced by the jeers that greeted Crean when he addressed an antiwar rally in Brisbane.

With Labor lining up behind the big lie campaign over Iraq’s alleged weapons of mass destruction and declaring its support for a war, if only it were sanctioned by the United Nations, the Greens became the main electoral beneficiaries of the opposition to Howard. Labor’s stand on the war only underscored its position in the course of the 2001 election—that the party had no essential differences with the reactionary

policies of the Howard government, including its assault on refugees and its attacks on jobs, wages and social conditions.

Labor’s simmering leadership conflict came to a head on April 15 when the *Australian* newspaper published opinion polls showing record unpopularity for the Labor Party and its leader.

Eight days later, the *Bulletin* magazine published an interview with Beazley in which he intimated his unfulfilled desire to become prime minister. The interview, as his factional backers intended, fanned a frenzy of media speculation, leaks and destabilisation. On June 6, after six weeks, Crean was finally pressured to call Monday’s ballot.

The subsequent campaign has been unlike anything seen in the history of the ALP. The contenders and their supporters have conducted an acrimonious war of words, aimed at destroying the credibility of their opponent in the press and television media. Crean has been described, for example, by his own parliamentary colleagues as “poor old Simple Simon... a leader with no standing, no authority, no presence, no passion and no electoral credibility,” a “dead cat being carried around in a hessian sack,” and a “dead man walking.”

The spectacle has served to lay bare the party’s internal decay.

In the first place, both candidates claim there are no policy differences between them. Beazley has declared he will continue with the policies outlined by Crean: “all the policy I’ve seen so far, and much of it was policy we announced before the last election, I absolutely agree with.” Beazley insists he is challenging for the leadership solely because he is the best man to “communicate” with the electorate—i.e., he rates better in the opinion polls.

For his part, Crean insists the issue is “policy not polls”. To try to give this claim at least a modicum of credibility, Crean now says he had disagreements with Beazley’s “small target” tactic leading up to the 2001 election. This is a reference to the ALP’s decision not to release any major policies until the eve of the election so that Howard and the Liberals could not attack them.

Crean also alleges he differed with Beazley over the Tampa crisis, when Howard used the Australian navy to prevent the Norwegian freighter from landing 400 asylum seekers on Australian shores. Beazley enthusiastically backed Howard’s position.

Unfortunately for Crean, there is absolutely no record, written or otherwise, of his having uttered a word of opposition to Beazley on either of these issues—at the time or in the ensuing year and a half.

Even more significantly, the leadership conflict has aroused no active involvement in what remains of the party's dwindling ranks. In times past, internal ALP struggles—between the “left” and “right” factions in the unions and the party, between Gough Whitlam and Jim Cairns in the late 1960s, to name just two, were bound up with broader social and political trends within the working and middle classes. Broad layers of ordinary working people would identify themselves as Whitlamites, Cairns supporters or even “Hawke men”.

No longer. Today no one would dream of calling themselves a Beazleyite or a Creanite. Beazley is well known as one of the most right wing political figures in the history of the Labor Party—attracting the epithet “Bomber” because of his proclivities for the military, while Crean is so inarticulate and bereft of ideas that a new term—“Creanspeak”—was coined while he was president of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU).

In all the myriad polls published in the past weeks, perhaps the most significant was the one published on Saturday in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. It revealed that more than half of all ALP voters believed neither man should be leader.

The ALP crisis is not the outcome of the past eighteen months. The deepening divide between the ALP and its former constituency in the working class and large sections of the middle class is a product of a process going back more than two decades.

Since the early 1980s, and the increasing adoption of the “free market” agenda by governments around the world, the Labor Party has abandoned even the limited social reforms it once advocated. Far from challenging the domination of corporate and financial wealth over every aspect of social life—working conditions, jobs, education and the health care system—the Labor Party has worked to facilitate it at every turn.

Writing in the *Australian Financial Review* of April 28, Susan Ryan, a leading member of the Hawke Labor government from 1983 to 1988, claimed that any revival of the party would require the type of policy initiatives undertaken in those years.

According to Ryan, “when Labor was swept from office by a tidal wave of electoral hostility in 1996” the preceding 13 years, its longest period in national government, were “in terms of change, innovation, and purpose, its best.” The problem facing the party today, she continued is that “Labor collectively has not convinced the electorate that it has a clear constructive plan for the nation, whether in relationship to the next US-inspired war or how universities should be funded.”

Here, Ryan has inadvertently revealed the real content of Labor's orientation. These years were the “best”—for the most powerful sections of the ruling elite. It was Labor that carried

through financial deregulation and the floating of the dollar—the kind of “free market” policies mooted by the Fraser Liberal government, but which it was unable to implement.

It was the Hawke and then Keating governments which presided over “labour market deregulation”—creating record levels of part-time and casual work, the growth of the “working poor” and the more than doubling of social inequality.

As for support for “US-inspired wars” there was no more enthusiastic backer of the first Gulf War than the Hawke Labor government.

The policies of the Howard government are not new. All of them represent a continuation and deepening of the attacks launched by Labor on the social position of the broad mass of working people.

Throughout Labor's “best” years its support rapidly declined. The party itself became a bureaucratic shell, with an inactive branch structure and a membership ruled over by factional cliques jockeying for their own interests. That is why it was swept out of office in 1996.

But sections of the ruling class recognise the need for a strong Labor Party in the future. Notwithstanding the media-generated hype about the “Churchillian” Howard, his strength and “uncanny” political abilities, his government remains in office largely by default due to the absence of any political alternative within the parliamentary framework.

A recent editorial in the *Sun-Herald* warned: “The crisis at the top of the Federal Opposition is not simply a political problem for the Labor Party. It is unhealthy for Australian democracy; the viability of our system rests on the presence of a strong opposition.”

These concerns reflect fears in ruling circles that the deepening hostility of masses of people to the policies and programs of both parties will start to find expression outside the parliamentary system. In that sense, the crisis of the Labor Party signifies the development of a breakdown in the entire political order.



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