

Australia: Pre-selection brawls demonstrate Labor's internal rot

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While current Federal Opposition leader Kim Beazley and former leader Simon Crean emerged from a so-called “peace meeting” in Sydney on March 13 claiming their discussion was “constructive”, venomous factional rivalries continue to fester just below the surface of the Australian Labor Party (ALP).

Crean demanded the extraordinary meeting, which was held at Beazley's Sydney apartment, in the wake of a recent round of vicious pre-selection battles for candidates in the next federal election. The pre-selections resulted in two Labor shadow ministers, agriculture spokesman Gavan O'Connor and Pacific islands and overseas aid spokesman Bob Sercombe, losing out, along with backbencher Ann Griffith.

Crean himself was obliged to fend off a challenge for his safe Melbourne seat of Hotham by National Union of Workers (NUW) Victorian state secretary Martin Pakula. Labor's shadow minister of state Alan Griffin and backbencher Harry Jenkins also managed to beat challengers.

While Beazley tried publicly to appear aloof from the factional bloodletting, it was no secret that the pre-selection challenges were organised by his supporters in Victoria's so-called “right faction” and directed by ALP Senator Stephen Conroy, a close Beazley ally and “numbers” man. All those targeted were Crean supporters during his leadership contest with Beazley in June 2003.

After beating his union-based opponent in the local ballot and forcing him to withdraw, a clearly buoyed Crean declared his win an “overwhelming victory for the rank and file” that “smashes the factional leaders”. He demanded Beazley act to restrict the power of Labor's factions and to push Conroy to resign his position as Labor's deputy Senate leader. Labor's health spokesperson Julia Gillard, who had supported Crean, earlier criticised Beazley for not calling off the dogs. She described the environment in the Labor Party as

“animalistic” and said factionalism in the ALP was “out of control and destructive”.

Despite talk of “a truce” between Beazley and Crean, their measured statements to the media indicated that open warfare could flare up again at any moment. Beazley promised only “to raise with colleagues” Crean's call for a “more inclusive leadership and a reduction in factional power” and consider “faction free ballots” for Labor's front bench.

Crean, for his part, said he had not expected any “concrete outcome” and insisted “there was no leadership challenge” underway. But in a clear threat to Beazley, he added there was a “leadership test”. The threat was all the more pointed as it followed an earlier statement by Gillard that she could “imagine herself as (Labor) leader” and that she would bring “a different type of leadership.”

One thing, however, became apparent during the weeks of open brawling. Neither side in any way represents the needs, strivings or aspirations of ordinary working people. Challengers and defenders alike are motivated by nothing more than personal ambition and a self-centred striving to extend their own political power base.

Over the entire period not one of the contestants, or their parliamentary and union backers, raised any differences over principle, policy or program, or voiced even the mildest objection to the openly pro-market, anti-working class trajectory of the Labor Party over the past two decades.

Pakula and fellow union official Australian Workers Union (AWU) national secretary Bill Shorten, who won pre-selection over sitting Labor frontbencher Bob Sercombe, talked about “generational change” and “renewal” to mask their real motivation: a lucrative parliamentary career, frontbench position and possible ministerial portfolio if Labor should ever again win government.

Both men are long-standing union bureaucrats who have

presided over unprecedented attacks on the jobs and working conditions of their members at the behest of employers. Shorten, for example, played a central role in overseeing the destruction of hundreds of AWU jobs last year in car component companies and this month accepted the destruction of 450 aircraft maintenance jobs at Qantas.

Crean is also far from being a champion of the working class. A former, long-serving union bureaucrat—including a stint as Australian Council of Trade Unions president—he won the federal seat of Hotham in 1990 and became a minister in the Hawke and Keating Labor governments.

In his ministerial capacity, Crean played a key role in Labor's assault on working conditions, jobs, social services and welfare programs. Such was the hostility generated by these attacks that the Keating government was defeated in 1996 with the largest-ever swing against Labor in working class electorates.

Following his pre-selection victory over Pakula, Crean boasted that his opponents had underestimated his popularity. He omitted to mention that the outcome of the contest relied on the votes of a handful of members, many of whom had been brought into the party through the notorious practice of branch stacking.

In the case of Hotham, just 284 members were involved in the ballot, including a large number of Cambodian residents. These people, routinely ignored by the major parties and left to cope by themselves with the lack of resources, jobs and services available to immigrants, were signed up to the party by local community leaders intent on delivering block votes to one or another faction in Labor's internal war, and receiving, in return, future favours.

Crean relied heavily on the Cambodian leaders to deliver the necessary votes. During the weeks preceding the contest, he went to great lengths to solicit their support, including attending a local Buddhist ceremony.

While both Crean and Gillard are actively opposed to Labor's factions, their position has nothing to do with respecting or defending the rights of rank and file ALP members. It is, on the contrary, a direct response to the demands of powerful sections of the financial and business elite, who regard Labor's web of factional alliances and entrenched interests as an unacceptable impediment to the implementation of the rapid and ongoing policy changes required.

These sentiments were articulated in an opinion piece in Rupert Murdoch's *Australian* by political editor Dennis Shanahan, who described Labor's factional system as

“corrupt, sleazy, self serving, power hungry, divided, anonymous and ruthless”.

The central problem, though, according to Shanahan was that, unlike in the past, “they [the factions] don't work”. In other words, while the system was always rotten, it could be tolerated. Now, however, Labor's factions hampered the delivery of the new requirements of big business and had, therefore, to be eliminated.

Crean's efforts as Labor leader to limit factional power within the party, including reducing the block representation of the unions at the ALP's national policy-making conference, earned him the wrath of the faction heads and contributed to his eventual loss of party leadership.

In the aftermath of the pre-selection wars, the *Australian* also editorialised to the effect that “Labor must unite—at least until the next election.” The editorial underscored the other major concern within ruling circles about Labor's factional wars—that the unseemly brawling over safe parliamentary seats had served to further undermined the party's historically low standing among ordinary working people. Since the entire parliamentary set-up is based on the domination of the two major parties—Labor and Liberal—the collapse of Labor's support threatens to destabilise the system as a whole.

As far as the working class is concerned, the latest internal conflict serves to highlight, yet again, the terminal rot of the Labor Party and the need for the building of a genuine political alternative—one that is prepared to articulate and fight for the interests of ordinary working people and, therefore, to challenge the very foundations of the capitalist system itself.



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