

Australian Labor Party conference: a right-wing stampede for office

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1 May 2007

Last weekend's Australian Labor Party (ALP) national conference in Sydney saw a stampede by the assembled parliamentarians, party officials and trade union bureaucrats to prove to big business, the media and to Washington their credentials for office.

With opinion polls predicting defeat for the 11-year-old Howard government at federal elections due later this year, the three-day conference was a stage-managed and cynical affair, designed to package the party's latest right-wing leader, Kevin Rudd, as the alternative prime minister.

On the one hand, delegates were at pains to appeal to the widespread popular hostility that exists towards the Howard government's involvement in the Iraq war, and to its workplace laws, which are ripping apart working conditions and living standards. At the same time, under the party's new slogan "fresh thinking," they sought to assure the corporate and media elites there was no line the party would not cross to secure their support.

Greeted with the obligatory standing ovation, Rudd set the tone with his opening speech last Friday. Labor, he declared, was the party to which the nation always turned in times of crisis. It was the party that "turned to America without pang or regret" in World War II, and it was the Hawke and Keating Labor governments in the 1980s and 1990s that "engineered the monumental task of turning around the nation's economy".

Howard's government had "run out of ideas" and was responsible for the "spectacular debacle" of the Iraq war—"the greatest foreign policy and national security policy disaster that this country has seen since Vietnam". It was up to Labor to "boost productivity" and meet the challenges to the nation, above all "the rise of militant Islamism", "energy security" and "the rise of China and India".

On workplace relations, Labor had previously pledged to "tear up" Howard's WorkChoices laws, which give employers carte blanche to coerce workers into individual contracts that scrap every basic right, including holidays, overtime payments and penalty rates. On the eve of the conference, Rudd suddenly announced that Labor would retain key features of WorkChoices, including outlawing virtually all industrial action—even to fight sackings or victimisations—and compulsory postal ballots for any union action, even during an authorised "bargaining period".

At the conference Rudd and his deputy, Julia Gillard, went further, unveiling a package called "Forward with Fairness—Labor's plan for fairer and more productive Australian workplaces". Despite the "fairness" tag, its purpose was plain. The document states: "Australia now needs a third round of economic reform to meet the needs of our 21st century economy. Labor understands a critical component of this next vital reform project must be a new industrial relations system

based on driving productivity in our private sector."

Labor's first "wave", in the 1980s, consisted of deregulating the financial sector and working with the trade unions, through a prices and incomes Accord, to systematically boost corporate profits by slashing real wages and scrapping hard-won working conditions, while suppressing industrial action. The second "wave," in the early 1990s, featured the imposition of "enterprise bargaining" to isolate workers from each other and tie their conditions to driving up company profits.

"Forward with fairness" was adopted unanimously, without any amendments or debate, let alone dissent. About a dozen union officials were then given the floor to speak on an accompanying resolution, which reiterated support for the Rudd-Gillard package. One after the other, they pledged that the unions would help boost productivity, while showing "unity" and "discipline" to get Labor elected.

Among them was Dean Mighell, from the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union, who had earlier co-sponsored an open letter to conference delegates urging them to reject Rudd's "WorkChoices lite" and "defend the right to strike". Nevertheless, Mighell told the conference he was backing the platform out of loyalty to Gillard and to help Labor win the election.

The only split vote came on the symbolic issue of uranium mining. It took considerable backroom manoeuvring to deliver Rudd the victory he needed—by just 205 to 190 votes—to overturn Labor's 20-year policy of allowing only three mines. Rudd's ability to prevail on this question was portrayed by the mainstream media as a test of his capacity to deliver the wider corporate agenda. Opponents of the shift had the numbers to block it, but organised just enough proxy votes to ensure Rudd victory.

As a result, Labor will allow unlimited mining while at the same time lining up with the Greens in opposing Howard government moves to establish nuclear power reactors and waste dumps in Australia. The debate was doubly farcical because Labor has backed the expansion of the uranium industry since 1952. In 1982, the ALP conference adopted the "three mines" policy as a means of reversing a ban adopted in 1977 (while Labor was out of office). Rudd was under pressure to push through an open slather policy to accommodate several new mines due to start producing ore.

One "left" faction leader, Martin Ferguson, a shadow minister and former Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) president, crudely spelt out what was on the minds of all delegates when he spoke in favour of Rudd's move. He was "sick and tired of being a Labor Party front-bencher in opposition", he declared. Delegates had to embrace whatever was necessary to regain office. Overturning the limits on uranium mining was nothing compared to what he and others

in the ALP and ACTU leadership had delivered in the 1980s and 1990s—the privatisation of the Commonwealth Bank and Telstra, and the imposition of enterprise bargaining.

The conference session on foreign policy and war made it plain that, while expressing tactical differences with the “disaster” in Iraq, a Labor government would send even more troops overseas to pursue the strategic interests of Australian imperialism, from Afghanistan to the South Pacific. The resolution also backed the Bush administration’s denunciations of Iran, declaring its nuclear programs “a grave threat to international security”. This could well become Washington’s pretext for an attack on Iran.

Unlike Labor’s last conference in 2004, which was utterly silent on the Iraq war, this one adopted a resolution condemning the Howard government for a “failed strategy,” which had “failed to win the war”. As with the US Democrats, Labor is seeking to adapt to the divisions in ruling circles over the debacle, as well as to public opposition to the war, while remaining fully committed to Washington’s criminal agenda in the Middle East and Central Asia.

The resolution echoed Rudd’s recent call for a “phased withdrawal of our combat forces currently deployed in southern Iraq in consultation with the Iraqi government and our allies”. This would leave hundreds of Australian military personnel in occupied Iraq and the Persian Gulf, while freeing up some ground forces for the ongoing occupation of Afghanistan, the current interventions in East Timor and Solomon Islands and future operations in the Pacific region. The resolution criticised the Iraq war as a “two billion dollar opportunity cost and massive distraction from dealing with security challenges in Australia’s immediate region”.

While delegates referred, belatedly, to the collapse of the lies told to launch the war (which every Labor leader embraced at the time), there was not one mention of the underlying reasons for the invasion—the drive by the US to seize Iraq’s vast oil reserves and secure strategic hegemony over the entire resource-rich Eurasian region against its rivals. Nothing could be said that would threaten Labor’s commitment to the US alliance.

Far from opposing militarist interventions, Labor’s “left” faction initiated unanimously adopted amendments to legitimise the sending of more troops to Afghanistan as an effort to “secure peace and stability, denounce the Iranian leadership as a threat to “safety and security” and back the dispatch of soldiers to East Timor as a “stabilising presence” that “should not be withdrawn prematurely”.

The conference’s final act was to pass a resolution allowing the party’s national executive to parachute a series of “star” right-wing and ex-military candidates into parliamentary seats. All remaining 21 pre-selection ballots in New South Wales, the most populous state, were taken out of the hands of local electorate committees. Having just expelled scores of members in the Newcastle area who objected to the similar ousting of a long-time MP at the state level, the Labor machine is moving to make such head office interventions the norm.

To some extent, this is simply formalising a shift that has already taken place. Labor is no longer a political party in any genuine sense. Over the past two decades, its anti-working class program has reduced its branches to rumps controlled by rival factional cliques, who allocate parliamentary seats and other perks. The latest move sets a precedent for the abolition of Labor’s supposed rank-and-file balloting, clearing the way for the ever more blatant fashioning of Labor’s personnel and policies to meet corporate needs, free of factional wrangling.

Rudd has already announced that two former military officers, Peter

Tinley and Mike Kelly, will be handed seats, along with an Adelaide celebrity gossip columnist, Nicole Cornes, who is not even a Labor Party member. “Safe” Labor seats in major working class areas of Sydney and Newcastle will be allocated to various figures, including former ALP president Warren Mundine, legal academic George Williams and ACTU secretary Greg Combet.

Like Blair’s “New Labour” in Britain, the ALP is anxious to divorce itself from any vestiges of organisational links to ordinary working people. As for the unions, their prolonged collaboration with employers has delivered them a shrinking membership base. A Labor government offers them the prospect of augmenting their role as an industrial police force, suppressing resistance to Labor’s assault on jobs, conditions and rights.

Sydney Morning Herald commentator Alan Ramsey gave voice to the contempt felt by wide layers of the population towards the Labor party when he described the weekend’s event as “a party political swill bucket as phoney as the applause by rote always is at these absurd party conferences so orchestrated and debauched of reality you wonder why they bother”. The reason, of course, is to impress the powers that be.

In some ways, the most important proceedings took place in the business lounge above the conference hall, which was blocked off from the public, including the 400 official ALP delegates. Some 173 business observers, many from the country’s largest corporations, paid an estimated \$1.3 million—\$7,500 each—to wine, dine and mingle with Labor leaders. The *Australian Financial Review* noted that “business executives and lobbyists were willing to turn up in record numbers at the party’s national conference over the weekend to network hard with the alternative government”. The chief hostess was another high-profile Labor recruit, former *Bulletin* and ABC journalist, Maxine McKew.

The pretence that Labor has anything whatsoever to do with working people was staunchly maintained by various protest groups, such as Socialist Alliance, which lobbied the conference and promoted Mighell’s short-lived pre-conference rhetoric as a genuinely militant voice within Labor.

The Murdoch media, not yet fully satisfied with Rudd’s commitments, offered him a little advice. Referring to the spectacular demise of Mark Latham—the Labor leader anointed by the previous national conference in 2004—an *Australian* editorial warned: “One of the key mistakes Mark Latham made in his bid to be prime minister was to poison relations between the ALP and the business community. Mr Rudd would be ill-advised to make the same error.”

There is no doubt that Rudd, along with the entire Labor and union apparatus, will be anxious to demonstrate he has heard the message, and taken it on board.



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