

# Australian Labor Party in its death throes

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One hundred and twenty years after its formation in 1891, the Australian Labor Party (ALP), the country's first national political party, has so few members that it faces organisational collapse. This is the conclusion of a special 2010 National Review by former Labor senator John Faulkner and former state premiers Bob Carr and Steve Bracks for the party's national executive, which was partially released last week.

The review was initiated after last year's federal election to investigate the precipitous fall in the organisation's largely paper membership, the historic decline in its primary vote in last year's federal election, and the reasons why the Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard lost its parliamentary majority, the first single-term administration to suffer such a loss since 1931.

Although Gillard, with the backing of the Greens and three independents, eventually cobbled together a minority government in September 2010, the review reveals that the party is nothing but a rotten carcass, with no genuine membership base and unable to raise any funds in the working class. The mass exodus from the organisation has been so rapid—a quarter of the membership or over 13,000 have quit since 2007—that Faulkner, Carr and Bracks admit that the party faces extinction.

So great is the crisis that the party will not release the entire three-part investigation. Parts one and two, which deal with former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's government from late 2007 to 2010 and Gillard's disastrous election campaign, can only be seen by the party's 25-member national executive. It will not be distributed to rank and file members.

Part three of the review, which is publicly available, gives some sense of the extent of the party's decay, and the deep hostility of the remaining membership towards the careerists and political operators who run its deeply anti-democratic apparatus. This is partially revealed in the handful of membership submissions published in the review.

One New South Wales member stated: "If the resolutions of the branches are ignored, if the rules of the party are ignored, if pre-selections [for parliamentary seats] are determined by head office, and not the relevant electoral

councils... why would people join a branch, why would people get involved in our party, why would people vote for us?"

These questions, to which the Labor Party cannot respond in any meaningful way, have already been answered by hundreds of thousands of workers across the country, who now refuse to support the organisation in any form—let alone join it—preferring to vote informal, spoil their ballots or back the Greens or other third parties or candidates. Popular hostility to the party, which is correctly regarded as an apparatus serving big business and the wealthy, is widespread and palpable.

According to the review, Labor membership now represents just 0.002 percent of the Australian population, with the combined membership of the Greens and other so-called third parties "ten times the size of the Labor Party."

Labor's official membership figures are, of course, inflated by branch-stacking and other bureaucratic techniques, but even these dubious numbers cannot hide the fact that the party is an empty shell. The current national membership is now only 37,000—a historic low. The organisation has been unable to staff many key polling booths during recent elections and 100 branches, or 10 percent of the party's total, have folded in the past three years.

Union-affiliated membership levels have also dropped, by over 100,000 during the same period—from more than 1.2 million to less than 1.1 million. These figures, however, have little to do with reality because only a tiny percentage of those workers whose unions are affiliated to the ALP belong to the party. In 2009, for example, only 2,400 unionists in New South Wales were members of the state branch out of a total ALP-affiliated union membership of 384,000. And, as the report admits, it is "unlikely further unions will affiliate in the future."

Southern Highlands branch member Maurie O'Neil told ABC Radio this week that the ALP was "heading towards extinction". The organisation, he declared, was "dominated by the relatives, in-laws and staffers" of senior party bureaucrats "who have no way of developing an empathy with people from real society.... We're moving to meet the

dinosaurs.”

Similar comments were made by most of the submissions cited in the review. “People in the party are deeply angry and upset about where the party is at. It would be fair to say morale is in the gutter,” one member declared.

“There’s a huge rift, a massive divide between rank and file members and the leadership who show them very little respect,” said another. Yet another commented: “Members have given up. They feel that their only function is to turn up on polling day and spend a day in the sun handing out how to vote cards.” A Sydney member complained that the long-held disconnect between local branches and the leadership had “disintegrated into distrust.”

One of the most frequent complaints was ongoing national executive interference in pre-selection decisions, with the 25-member body constantly over-ruling branches. According to a recent media report, local pre-selection decisions have been overruled more than 70 times by the national executive in recent years, the majority of these since 2007.

“At the moment, the party branches are dying, because the rank and file are given no voice in the Party,” one New South Wales member explained. “The members and branches no longer have any say in pre-selections or in policy. Unless this trend can be reversed, we will become a party that exists just to provide a path for ex-trade union leaders and ex-staffers of politicians to enter parliament.”

The national review “noted” these complaints, admitted that ongoing interventions had “caused a sickness at local level” and solemnly declared that, in the future, members would be given greater control. It failed to mention, however, that the national executive shut down five local pre-selection decisions in the lead up to this month’s New South Wales state election and, just last month, overruled the Broadmeadows branch in Melbourne to impose Frank McGuire, a wealthy property developer, and not even a member of the party, on the electorate for the recent by-election.

Faced with organisational collapse, the national review’s authors made various proposals to boost membership and develop “community engagement”, including an amnesty for lapsed or resigned members, and “registered” non-member supporters to be given the right to vote in parliamentary pre-selection ballots, along the lines of US primaries.

Like the numerous post mortems conducted by the party over recent decades, these proposals are simply the death rattle of a moribund organisation. Nothing will change in this preeminent party of Australian capitalism, which, like its social democratic counterparts internationally, long ago ditched its social reformist rhetoric to function as a direct

agency of finance capital, advocating the “free market”, budget austerity and unrelenting attacks on the working class.

One of the most glaring omissions of the Faulkner, Carr and Bracks investigation is any reference to the political coup that removed Rudd as prime minister on June 23 last year, or to those involved in the anti-democratic operation.

While millions of ordinary Australians were deeply hostile to the coup and many refused to support Labor in the subsequent federal election for precisely that reason, the investigation is deafeningly silent about it. Not a word is said about factional coup plotters Mark Arbib, Bill Shorten, Australian Workers Union leader Paul Howes or their connections to the “Big Three” Australian mining giants and the US embassy in Canberra, whose interests the coup served. (See: “Australia: WikiLeaks cables reveal secret ties between Rudd coup plotters and US embassy”)

Senator John Faulkner went out of his way last week to deny media reports that parts one and two contained comments criticising Rudd’s leadership and Gillard’s subsequent elevation.

“Our report,” Faulkner insisted, “didn’t consider or make any judgment on the decision of the federal parliamentary Labor Party to change the leadership in June 2010.” In other words, as far as the Labor leadership is concerned, the filthy backroom operation is a closed book.

The investigation politely noted that Rudd’s directive in 2007 that the prime minister, rather than the parliamentary caucus, should have sole power to appoint the ministry, was a breach of party rules and recommended that it should be reviewed at Labor’s national conference later this year.

Gillard, however, immediately ruled this out, making clear to the parliamentary caucus that there would be no change to the functions of her office, including her “right” to select ministers. She would select the cabinet and it would “determine policy,” she insisted. In other words, even the party’s officially appointed “national review” will be unilaterally overruled—without a word of dissent.



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