

# Labor slides as it embraces capitalism's cronies

The latest Labor Party review of its own

organisation is a symptom of the ALP's problems, not part of the solution.

When its membership or electoral appeal is poor, Labor holds inquiries. The subsequent reports have had minimal impact on its fortunes. The long-term decline in membership since the 1950s and, crucially, the decay of the ALP's relationship with its core working-class supporters, have continued.

A section of the 2010 National Review, released last week, notes that "the 2010 election saw many important polling booths around Australia understaffed or understaffed for the first time in living memory".

Membership of the ALP stagnated at about 45,000 from the late 1950s to the mid 1960s. A graph in the Review suggests there were only 38,000 members in 2010, by which time the Australian population had almost

The ALP's real problem is that it accepts and acts on behalf of capitalism, **RICK KUHN** writes

doubled. The last time Labor even came close to winning 50 per cent of the primary vote nationally was in 1983. The ALP won only 38 per cent in 2010. Support for the party is currently about 36 per cent.

The Labor Party's electoral support and membership did grow from the end of the 1960s, in the early 1980s and again, for a while, around 2007. These advances were due to revivals in the level of class struggle and dissatisfaction with tired conservative governments, not worthy of party reports.

Whitlam rode to office in 1972 on a great wave of social and industrial militancy. The 2010 Review recognises that the campaign against John Howard's WorkChoices industrial relations law made Labor's 2007 election victory possible.

Political advertising and public election funding

have reduced the role of members in the party as campaigners and fundraisers. State and national executives have increasingly imposed candidates on safe Labor seats. "Members feel alienated and disenfranchised in the modern Labor Party."

Local party branches were once activist organisations connected with wider struggles. According to the Review, "Such issues-based campaigning has been completely absent from Labor's activity for a number of years."

No surprise, when the party's leadership pursues neo-liberal economic policies, retains the draconian Australian Building and Construction Commission, opposes equal marriage rights for gays and lesbians, locks up refugees, continues John Howard's Northern Territory intervention, and proposes to deal with

climate change by subsidising big polluters. If the Labor Party is to grow, the Review argues, members have to be given something to do between elections.

It returns to the notion of the direct election of National Conference delegates by member, recommended by three previous reports since 1965. But the vast majority of members won't be delegates and, as the Review states, "Party conferences have become bland, anodyne affairs ... the life has been draining out of the party".

Julia Gillard has made it clear that "while the party sets the platform, the Government must determine its policies". In other words, the Parliamentary Labor Party will not feel bound to implement decisions made by National Conferences, no matter how conference delegates are selected. Hardly a recipe for

engaging members in policy development.

The *Review* does not oppose Labor's conservative policies or call on party members to mobilise against them. It recommends that social justice campaigns should be conducted not by and in local branches, but by a body "linked to the ALP". Such a front organisation would be unlikely to embarrass the party ... or to attract new members.

Ultimately, the Review places its hope for expanding the membership of the ALP in the failed and bureaucratic "organising model" of recruitment taken from the Australian Council of Trade Unions and various trade unions.

The underlying problem facing the ALP is one of basic policy. The nature of their jobs means that the dominant elements in the party, union officials and leading politicians, accept

the framework of the Australian state and capitalism. Compared with union officials, Labor politicians are under less pressure from workers and, in government, they are responsible for managing Australian capitalism.

So they act more consistently in the interests of big business than those of the party's own working-class base.

The latest review was conducted by three politicians who fit this profile: from the right of the ALP, former premiers Steve Bracks and Bob Carr; from the left, former federal defence minister John Faulkner.

Any revival of the party will result from the kind of wider struggles that these men have consistently opposed.

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