

# Missing the Oxygen of Office

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John Button

*Beyond Belief: What Future for Labor?*

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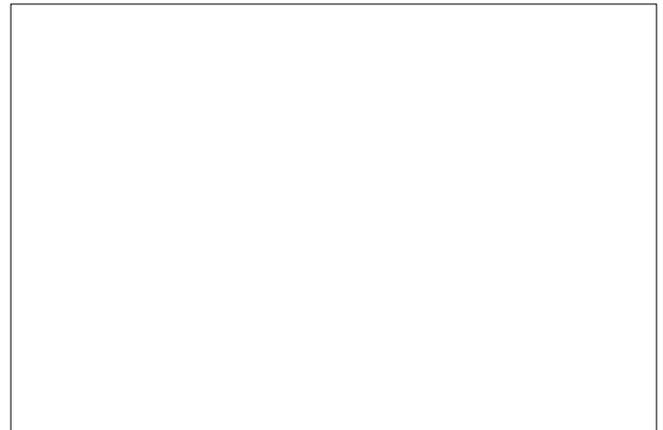
JOHN BUTTON'S prognostications on the state of the Labor Party have already attracted substantial discussion. Coming little more than six months after Labor lost the federal election — and also lost a good deal of self-respect — he has caught the moment in the political cycle when doubt sets in. Three defeats on the trot have an unsettling effect on a losing team, especially one playing in what is effectively a two-club competition. They suggest that something serious is afoot and that it will no longer do to wait for an improvement of form. This was acknowledged when Kim Beazley stood down from the leadership and Bob Hawke and Neville Wran were asked to review the party's structure and procedures. With the Government holding the initiative and the Opposition in the doldrums, it is hardly surprising that recriminations have surfaced. Yet there is nothing novel in the present mood of introspection: it gripped Labor in the late 1970s, the Liberals in the late 1980s.

Some have noticed that John Button's diagnosis and remedy bear a striking resemblance to the views he expressed back then. On that occasion, he suggested that Labor's traditional links with the trade unions had become an obstacle to the social democratic orientation it needed to adopt, just as he argues here. But then he was chairing the national committee of inquiry into the state of party; now he is commenting from the sidelines, and his mordant observations have found very little support from the present custodians of the party's fortunes.

He relates in his essay an exchange with one of them, who dismissed his views as those of the 'superannuated glitterati'. There is certainly a tendency for retired parliamentarians to dilate on the shortcomings of the Labor Party after they have completed careers in it. I recall participating in a radio discussion during the mid-1980s when Clyde Cameron and Jim McClelland bemoaned the departure of Hawke and Paul Keating from the standards of proletarian democracy that they had apparently upheld. In the case of Button, there is the additional impatience with a former polmie who always seemed to possess a licence of dispensation from the vows of that calling. Radio listeners in Melbourne will recall Button's con-

versations with Fred Chaney, the two men offering a quizzical commentary on the partisan excesses of their colleagues.

To dismiss his analysis of the present state of the Labor Party on these grounds would be foolish. Button registers a mood of disenchantment and points to clear signs of decay. Party membership is at an all-time low, and Labor's percentage share of the primary vote slipped last December to a level last seen seventy years ago. Above all, the party lacks animation. Its failure to offer clear and coherent policies as an alternative to those of the Coalition betrays an inability to articulate its purpose.



**'A LABOR CONFERENCE':**

**'Sing them "The Red Flag", Billy, and pacify them!' David Low's cartoon was drawn in the lead-up to the conscription referendum on 28 October 1916, when Caucus was the scene of heated debate and division that eventually spilled over onto the floor of Parliament. (Bulletin, 28 September 1916)**

*Beyond Belief* claims that Labor is now at the lowest ebb of its hundred years in Australian politics. As an historical claim, this seems dubious. Its present electoral condition, a few seats short of a majority in the Commonwealth parliament, and holding office in every one of the states and territories, is far stronger than in earlier periods in the wilderness, both between the wars and during the 1950s and 1960s. John Button recalls Jim Cairns holding the faithful at a cold outdoor meeting in 1955; but that was in the aftermath of the Split that kept Labor in the wilderness for a further seventeen years and that led one commentator to ask whether the ALP was doomed to *Labor in Vain*?

The branch membership is a poor index of Labor's vitality. Unlike the European socialist and social democratic parties, the ALP has never been a mass party. Nor have its branches operated as the site of democratic political participation, except during the formative decades and at fleeting moments

when the usual mechanisms of control were suspended. As early as the 1920s, Vere Gordon Childe noted how a party started by a band of inspired socialists had degenerated into 'a vast machine for capturing political power'.

It is the declining efficacy of that machine that brings reorganisation. Federal intervention into New South Wales at the end of the 1930s, just as into Victoria in the 1960s, was designed to open up tight cliques to wider participation. Electoral failure was the reason for ensuring broader representation. This emphasis upon outcomes has always shaped the Labor Party, so that the insistence on capturing and holding power through parliamentary representation has constantly overridden the rules for democratic decision-making through conference, caucus and the pledge.

The interplay between labour as a social movement and the Labor Party as a political organisation has proved remarkably durable. Button argues that it is reaching the point of exhaustion. The organisation now throws up Labor members of parliament whose entire political lives are shaped by career choices utterly removed from the people they represent. They serve an apprenticeship in a union office, attach themselves to a sitting member, join a faction, count the numbers and pledge their souls for preselection. Nothing else matters. One novice recently told friends that his marriage had ended but the damage was minimal: he would still have his wife's vote in the imminent ballot for endorsement.

Button blames the factional system for this debilitation. It is the factions that nullify the democratic procedures of the party, control all positions, determine all decisions and smother rank-and-file participation. Who would bother to attend a branch meeting when any issue of any consequence has already been settled behind closed doors? As he describes them, the factions are a Frankenstein's monster, created out of the internal arguments between left and right, but quickly taking on a life of their own. While the differences over policy are exhausted, he suggests, the factions are stronger than ever and the 'control freaks' who lead them operate adeptly as warlords, all too ineptly in winning back voters.

This is a striking reversal of the way Labor's success was understood during its unprecedented tenure of office between 1983 and 1996. Then the party's system of apprenticeship was seen as an advantage over the amateurism of the Coalition. It groomed its politicians in organisational positions; the Liberals had to recruit outsiders such as Hewson who found the transition from boardroom to party room abrupt and uncongenial. Then the factional system was seen as providing the stability the Liberals so evidently lacked with their frequent changes of leadership, and avoiding the public arguments that culminated in Joh Bjelke-Petersen's disastrous run for Canberra.

Button's account of the factional system during the 1980s presents his own centrists in a rosy light. In noting that the New South Wales right embarked on a recruitment drive in the

outlying states, he underplays the local dynamics. Kim Beazley once told me of the meeting that he and Brian Burke helped organise to establish the right faction in Western Australia. He brought with him Geoffrey Gallop, then a lecturer in politics at Murdoch University with a keen interest in political theory. Working on the principle that practice must be grounded in theory, Dr Gallop offered to distribute a paper he had written on Anthony Crosland's revisionism. Kim had to reassure the trade union heavies that his friend was fair dinkum.

In Button's analysis of Labor's predicament, the relationship with the unions is a bad habit. Because the affiliated unions have such strong representation on the decision-making bodies of the party, they too have become factional resources. Because their membership continues to decline, they are prey to such manipulation. Like the Labor Party, the unions have a declining membership and hierarchical habits, and are slow to respond to changing social circumstances. Better, then, that they go their separate ways.

There is no doubt that the Labor Party needs to sustain and build relationships with a range of organisations beyond the affiliated unions — not least the unaffiliated ones. There is no doubt either that the rebuilding of unions is one of the most urgent challenges. Given the changes in employment and the current offensive of the Commonwealth government, the reconstruction of collective activity in the workplace and the affirmation of the rights of labour have unprecedented significance. To sever the unions' links with the Labor Party would be singularly unhelpful.

What about the consequences of such a step for the Labor Party? John Button argues for a social democratic programme as an antidote to market fundamentalism. He maintains an appropriate scepticism about the Third Way. He observes — and who would argue with him? — that Labor has been 'most electable when it has a strong agenda for change'. We therefore await the present review of policy with anticipation.

Beyond this, there is the party's credo — what market researchers would call its brand image, and strategic planners its vision, but what used to be known as ideology. Already we have proposals to exhume and rebury that most ancient of all shibboleths, the socialist commitment. It is, so the latest wave of revisionists tells us, an obsolete encumbrance of no practical import. But surely socialism is no more Utopian than individualism, that chimera of the utterly autonomous individual, complete and self-sufficient, owning no regard for whatever lies outside its own interest.

Much of what Button tells us about the predicament of Labor applies to any party that is deprived of the oxygen of office. Much of what he says about the loss of political faith holds for all parties after the age of ideology. Much of what he sees as a decline in political participation is a symptom of public life in an era of unease and withdrawal. It is the rediscovery of the social that holds the key.