

**Address to the NSW Fabian Society seminar at Gleebooks on Wednesday April 20, 2005**

**Could Chifley win Labor preselection today?**

**By Rodney Cavalier**

Could Ben Chifley win a Labor preselection today? No.

Could a railwayman from Bathurst win preselection today? No.

Could a man or woman who works during the day or night in a job that involves getting dirty and perspiring and without access to a telephone during working hours win a preselection today? No.

Could a professional devoted to his practice and his clients - that is, willing to work long hours, including night and weekends in preparation and research - could such a person win a preselection today? No.

Who can win a preselection today?

In the absence of intervention at the level of the parliamentary leadership, preselection in seats which matter falls exclusively to the inhabitants of the political class. The political class embraces union officials, ministerial and parliamentary staffs and party employees.

Most of these people, certainly the aspirants for Parliament, are an operative for a faction. The ALP factional operatives are members of the only class which has survived into this century - the political class. They are a coherent grouping which fulfills all of the Marxist definitions of class: consciousness of each other, action in concert, action in self-interest.

The nucleus of the ALP political class is trade union control of the Labor Party. Although unions are reduced to 17 per cent of the workforce and falling, though they represent fewer than one in ten Australian voters and do not command the votes of even half of their own number, union control of the ALP governance is stronger now than ever - even though its formal representation at Conference is 50 per cent. Union control of the administration and the preselection oversight bodies is 100 per cent.

The old BHP culture did not approach the nepotism in some union offices of the de la Salle old boys, the IR undergraduates, the Labor Club at uni X coterie. The coming people are so often the sons and daughters of, married to or living with - or all three.

Unions are the creatures of faction, factions are the instruments of unions. They are indivisible. Break union control, the faction system breaks with it. Workers, note, are not a part of this equation.

The political class is a coterie. The coterie has its differences within - any such divisions are not about ideas or ideology. The factions have become executive placement agencies, disputes between them become serious only when they cannot agree on a placement. They are effectively united for themselves against the world. Otherwise rational adults will defend union control of the ALP, the sine qua non for their place in the sun. Most would not in a world based on merit. The monopoly has come to pass during our adult lives, it

became irresistible after 1996 and the loss of Federal government. The decline begins with the otherwise glorious story of the rise and rise of R.J.L.Hawke.

Bob Hawke came from another generation. He was a Rhodes Scholar, cased by Albert Monk, entreated to enter the ACTU. Hawke had the good fortune to be learning at the feet of men who had lived a life, a life which embraced the trenches of the Great War, the deprivations of the 1930s, war and reconstruction. They had been young men in the False Dawn of 1917; not all thought it false, many were true believers in Marx and the perfectability of Man, they lived their commitment into their private lives, resolute in their contempt for private property and the accumulation of capital.

Young Hawke could listen and absorb, build on his reading, mature in his outlook. In having to speak the language of real workers and the men who represented real workers (real workers themselves for the most part), Hawke acquired his distinctive argot, an idiom and a manner which Australians found compelling, especially women.

The rise and rise of Bob Hawke, a career made outside the Parliament, sent a message most terrible to the ambitious. In no time at all a university background in union office became common place. So much so that the products or dropouts of university captured union after union. Having executed the capture they placed more and more of themselves as vacancies arose. Inside one generation the paid positions in unions were filling with men, then women, who had no connection with the industries and callings they were representing, placed there by people exactly like themselves. So many of the representatives of the workers have themselves scarcely any knowledge of work.

Simultaneously, a career and working life spent wholly inside the ALP political class became possible. The notion of a separate stream of ministerial staff is as recent as 1972. Gough thought it useful for his Minister for Transport to have an adviser or two - not ten or 12 - from outside the public service who knew something about planes and trains. Not someone to lend a hand to Luke or Mark in Fowler.

Add up the private staffs for State and Federal Members, upper and lower, ministers and frontbenchers, you will have a vast number of paid jobs at the disposal of the political class, jobs which serve to reinforce its grip on the party at all levels and throughout Sydney and its satellites. None existed pre-1972. None of the theories of ALP democracy have countenanced the existence of a standing army of employees inside the party itself.

People join factions these days because of opportunity and entreaty. The obvious comparison is with the market for footballers: the scouts offer position and opportunity. If the scouts get it right - that is they place the right people who then make good - then their own positions and their own segment of the political class is fortified. That competition between the placement agencies is all the swirl there is these days.

The segments of the coterie are indivisible: men and women move effortlessly between these occupations as opportunity arises or is denied. For most of them the ultimate is to crack a seat in Parliament. Within one generation Bob Hawke has become Steve Hutchins.

The phenomenon is not a conspiracy. It is what happens when a vibrant culture enters a vulnerable host. Like lantana in natural bushland.

What is the portrait of the modern Labor Member of Parliament? She is cased at university where she is achieving less than academic greatness. He will have demonstrated a willingness to follow a leader, not to step out of line. She will join an ALP branch where the postage and the mail-out is met by an MP. His first serious employment is with an MP. Or a Minister where she will know nought of the subject area of the Minister's portfolio. Or a union where he will not have worked in the industry covered by the union employing him. Or her.

She is preselected perhaps for where she lives, perhaps for somewhere she has no association; he has minimal or zero community record. Her campaign is managed by people supplied by Head Office, it is paid for by Head Office, its strategy is determined by Head Office.

Having been elected, he enters the caucus of the faction to which he owes everything; she votes as the leadership instructs, he confirms for another parliamentary term the hegemony of the processes that made her possible. When she delivers her Maiden Speech, it is probable that the staffer of a Minister will have written it. Someone who hopes to walk in her or his footsteps.

The processes of such advancement obviate the humanising essential for a successful adult life - what we call maturing in response to personal experience, intellectual growth, changes subtle in objective response to change in the world. When your outlook on politics is determined for you and your continuing advance depends on adhering to that determination, maturing does not come to pass.

In the natural world the equivalent is the cossetted existence of creatures born in a zoo, knowing no other environment. They cannot survive in the world. They lack the skills to hunt and kill their own. The most obvious consequence is how Federal Labor has lost the faculty of persuasion. Holding a poll to find out what the punters are thinking and then promise that finding as your own best thinking may be the core of what passes for philosophy in modern politics. It is the opposite of leadership.

The Labor Party has ceased to exist below. Its death is one of the great unreported stories of Australian politics. The nurturing of new members, once so vital in our growth, even more vital in passing on traditions of honour and service, is less likely than at any time in our history.

Labor has become a cartel party, essentially dependent on the unacknowledged largesse of the taxpayer. If MPs and Senators ceased to provide postage and stationery to branches in NSW, not fewer than 500 would perish by the end of next month at the latest.

A party does not have to be democratic to survive or prosper. The ALP for much of the time since 1916 is living proof of that. Self-perpetuating oligarchies are the norm for preferment within most parties around the world. The trick is for the established leadership to shake up the ladder which placed them there, to look beyond the obvious and the obsequious to bring in new talent. Boards of public companies have moved away from the nepotism that has become the norm for trade unions and the ALP. You have to be a super-optimist to believe that the members of the political class - occupying positions which represent their bread and butter and their passport to a glittering life - will upset the mechanisms which preserve them from a world based on merit.

Being in government is almost everything. There is no embracing ideology to sustain a Labor Party out of power, no light on the hill, no reserves of character or historical memory. You will note that exactly the same has occurred with the UK Conservative Party. Parties which build their governance on being the government have a crisis waiting for them when they forfeit the public service superstructure. Some of us were predicting this consequence by the early 1990s.

The Caucus which assembled after the election of 2004 is the weakest since Federation. I will defend that statement on any matrix of capacity anyone wishes to employ. The only contest for the appellation are the disasters of 1916 and 1931 when Labor Governments suffered wholesale defections and massive electoral defeats. In those disasters the party suffered massive losses of good people, crises of relevance, doubts about survival. What the party did not then suffer was a crisis in conviction.

No one will dare cite a comparison with 1975. Post-1975, the dimensions of defeat inspired defiance and a great rebuilding. Compare and contrast those earlier responses to defeat, compare and contrast who remained then and who remains now for the crusade required.

Out of the embers of 1975 Labor emerged with a critical mass of seriously able men who were there for the long haul - Bill Hayden, Lionel Bowen, John Button, Ralph Willis, Peter Morris, Peter Walsh, Mick Young, not to forget a very young, bloodthirsty Paul Keating. Where is anyone of that quality now? Other than those who were there already, pre-1996?

Labor stood still in 1977 in terms of seats, it was otherwise with the infusion of quality representation - Brian Howe, John Dawkins (returning after defeat), Barry Jones, Gareth Evans, John Brown, Neal Blewett. John Kerin followed in a by-election. In 1980, the equivalent to 2001 in our time, Michael Duffy and Kim Beazley entered the House. So did the immediate past President of the ACTU, a bloke by the name of Hawke.

Who among the front bench of 2004 would find a place in a Hawke-Keating Ministry even at no.27? Kim, certainly. How many others?

2004 was the third election after going down. The quality of the 2004 intake is embarrassing. The Liberal and National Parties have renewed their ranks, Labor has not. The lack of diversity in Labor's Federal ranks has at last achieved media comment.

We have become progressively weaker after each election since 1996. When you know who is jostling in the queues for coming preselections, you will know that the situation is going to get worse. Much worse.

In every other crisis of identity and electoral melancholy we have tended to draw on History, to note that the Labor Party is magnificent in adversity, to note the party is the most resilient creature in the Australian landscape.

Is there cause for such comfort now? Where exactly does modern Labor draw from? Once upon a time Labor could draw from all the factories in Australia and all the mines, the railways and ships and trucks, the waterfront, the gangs working in the open air. It could supplement that gene pool with a growing army of adherents in the liberal arts, teaching,

the law and other professions, essentially anyone we might have characterised as progressive in a whole range of social issues, foreign policy, nationalism, civil liberties. Either directly or through the ranks of union officials, Labor could draw on the best out there for renewal.

Each such source of supply has dried up.

Unless the leadership at the machine level and the parliaments set about smashing the monopoly enjoyed by the political class the party is doomed. Rules changes are required which eliminate employees of the party and Ministers and parliamentarians from contesting selection ballots. The separate disaster of trade union officials should be addressed by legislation that requires each official to be drawn from the ranks of the working membership.

Impositions on the lines of Peter Garrett and Frank Sartor will occur more often during a transitional phase until the party membership rebuilds a catchment of candidates who can represent their fellow Australians and lead Australia's government. A good start will be candidates who are employees in productive employment where it is a dismissable offence during working hours to advance the cause of the ALP or your own preselection prospects.

At beginning of this address I posed questions which flow from the question which gives tonight its discussion. There is one other question. Would Chifley want Labor preselection today? I'll leave that answer to you.