

'Dilemmas and distractions'
'Engaging with Labor in Power'

Catalyst Forum, Monday 25th August 2008

Introduction

It's been just on nine months since we saw the back of John Howard.

For many of those in this room – and for all those on our side of politics – it was the end of a long journey.

Over 11 years we transformed ourselves from a movement that had worked closely with the government of the day, through different phases – almost like the process of grief.

For the first few terms I think we were in denial. Labor continued to act like it was in power and unions thought it was only a matter of time until they were in office.

Then there was a period of grief – that spanned the Tampa election and the implosion of Latham which saw the Howard Government seize control of the Senate.

And then finally, there was the period we galvanised ourselves and moved on and joined together in what will, for many of us be the highlight of our careers.

We stared down WorkChoices, we united together, and we tried new things while not losing sight of who we were.

And on the evening of November 24, 2007 we won, well.... sort of.

In the intervening nine months it is fair to say, that shifting gears to the new political environment has not been easy.

After 11 years, three years of campaigning against a miserable union hating conservative like John Howard for most of us, it would never be a simple transition.

- 11 years of bagging one awful bloke
- 11 years of talking about the coalition being on the side of big business, and
- 11 years of outrage over the coalition's handling of everything from the GST to refugees

We've spent more than a decade training up the Australian public so they would vote out the Howard Government.

Now our team's out on the field, and we're completely out of practice.

And I fear many of us are at risk of being left on the sidelines because we're not sure how to get into the game.

At the risk of stretching the sports analogy a little too far, the reality is, the rules have changed and the game is nothing like it was the last time there was a federal labor government.

From my own perspective the past nine months have been a period of some frustration.

The battle over power privatisation in NSW has been a diversion – not of our making – but one that we were duty bound to fight.

At the same time there is a perception that federal Labor – having won the election on scrapping WorkChoices – is now too focused on steering a centre course – accepting the big business agenda that wants to marginalise unions and diminishes collective bargaining in this country.

But more fundamentally, at both a state and federal level, the question has been – with Labor in power – what role do unions play?

The accepted wisdom is that the Accord was a disaster for unions because it took power away from the workplace and put it behind closed doors.

Progress for workers was seen to be given by government, not fought for. Significant improvements to super, to Medicare, to wages and conditions, were ignored.

And the union membership over this period collapsed.

But with no formal structures to manage power – are we in any better shape?

Is it enough for unions to become 'just another interest' group to allow the party we created to look like it sits in the centre?

Should a Labor government be imposing barriers to right of entry and the right to strike, to appease big business?

Is it acceptable that organizations like the Australian Building and Construction Commission are allowed to remain in place?

And most fundamentally, if we say no to these propositions, what can we do about it?

The challenge now for the union movement, and all those on the progressive side of politics is to find ways to campaign on our issues so that we influence policy and create change – without knocking out the government.

And that means doing at least three things:

First, we need to cut through the everyday dilemmas and distractions of dealing with governments in power and define the issues that matter.

Secondly, we need to shift out of our comfort zone of running negative campaigns against and simply 'opposing'.

And thirdly – and most important – we need to start leading public debate from the front – making our agenda good politics for any government to embrace.

What we need is an alternate vision that people are prepared to buy into and most importantly we need to build power to make that vision a reality.

This will mean getting out of the shadows of labor and taking a risk.

DILEMMAS AND DISTRACTIONS

But first to dilemmas and distractions.

These are some of those situations where under the coalition you might have taken aim and gone for the jugular.

They hated you, you hated them a press release and bad day's media for the other side was part and parcel of a good day's work.

No love lost because there was never any love in the first place.

Now relationships are far more complicated and there is fundamentally more at stake.

Those of you following the debate about power privatisation will know I've had my fair share of distractions and dilemmas for this year already.

A week after the Rudd Government was elected, we were still recovering from election night hangovers, and the Lemma Government re-announced it would sell off the state's electricity assets.

In one fell swoop thousands of workers would be displaced, NSW residents exposed to higher prices and services sent off-shore.

We couldn't and wouldn't lie down and take it, but nearly 12 months on, this is a distraction that's sapping our campaign resources and getting in the way of progress in other areas.

This is an issue that we're continuing to fight but we can't let that get in the way of representing the 600,000 union members in NSW.

Yes we want essential services to remain in public hands, yes we want workers treated with respect, and yes this issue is important.

But so is the biggest ever change to Occupation Health and Safety laws this country has ever seen.

So is maintaining the independent umpire in NSW, the Industrial relations commission. The IRC is critical to our ability to maintain pay and conditions for every worker in this state.

The electricity debate shouldn't define who we are and what we're about.

So I guess the moral of the story is, don't do as I do, do as I say!

But in all seriousness, the disagreements, personality clashes and policy tensions that arise everyday when Labor is in government can easily hijack the agenda and keep us on the dreaded sideline of politics.

FROM POSITIVE TO NEGATIVE

So if we're not being sucked in dilemmas and distractions and we don't want to campaign against the government of the day, what do we do?

The answer is, we've got to campaign *for* something.

For people like us that's all a little counterintuitive. We are used to saying 'No'

No to job cuts, no to pay cuts, no to privatisation, no to WorkChoices

Sadly, we have had few opportunities in recent years to say yes.

If you think about it, running positive campaigns is what advertisers and marketers do every day.

They put up something you didn't know you needed or wanted, and convince you, you can't live without it.

Instead of campaigning against their competitor they campaign for their product, be it a faster car, better skin, the chocolate bar you can't live without, the holiday of your dreams.

Advertisers paint the picture and then put their audience into the frame.

I am not suggesting we need to adopt these advertiser tactics – but there is a point here that is relevant to us.

We need to decide what the picture of work and life looks like when unions play a part and then find ways that workers want to see themselves in there too.

Is it about working hours, penalty rates, maternity leave, career progression, pay equity or just having a say in your workplace?

More fundamentally, is it about asserting that collective bargaining – working together to achieve outcomes – is a fundamental good that politicians should support?

By shifting to the positive we start to create a more complex debate on our issues that isn't just about winners and losers at election time but about things that matter.

Take the Rudd government's decision to retain the Australian Building and Construction Commission.

This is a government body that wields more power interrogating a building worker over a union meeting, than ASIO does dealing with a terrorist.

It's a terrible organisation and bad government policy. It tramples on the rights of building workers and those on construction sites – it treats building workers worse than it treats suspected criminals.

But getting rid of the Labor Government won't get rid of the ABCC and it certainly won't lead to better rights on sites for workers in the construction industry.

Labor in power at all levels of government demands new thinking. We can't afford to sit in labor's shadow... nudging people from behind.

LEADING FROM THE FRONT

Successful leadership in an environment of wall to wall Labor Governments is about leading from the front. It's what our members expect and deserve.

With both political parties gravitating towards the centre of politics it's even more important that we set the agenda and drive our own issues.

Limping down the centre line will not win Kevin Rudd a second term in government it's not what won the last election.

Fighting on issues that mean something to Australian working people, and that includes replacing WorkChoices *will* get them over the line and drive the nail into the coffin of the liberal/national coalition.

But unions in recent times have not been accustomed to running out ahead of the pack – if anything we have a reputation for falling behind.

Take the Accord days. Like I said earlier, yes there were gains, but they weren't ours because we didn't claim them, and we didn't challenge the Hawke Keating Governments if things didn't go our way.

And so publicly, we became a toothless tiger in Labor's pocket.

I like to think we've come a long way since then. But for many unions, taking a stand or position outside of the Labor Party policy platform is almost unheard of.

And because of this reticence, business is outplaying us on both flanks.

They are spending more on professional lobbyists and political donations than unions have ever done, and they're campaigning publicly, ahead of Labor, and forcing change by shifting public opinion.

Unions need to develop our capacity to build power and influence. We need to accept that voters at party conferences and donations are not enough.

As I have said the game has changes. Unions need to build new relationships with other organisations with similar values sets to ours. How we build those relationships and develop the issues that matter will be all important.

We all know that opinion polls have more impact on politicians than a bunch of union officials turning up to a meeting at parliament house. Building new relationships in the community and being prepared to advocate for what is right is the way of the future.

CONCLUSION

In the end the best thing we can do is to get out ahead of the game, change the debate so it's on our issues and make it so that the Government of the day – whoever they are, playing on our turf.

The dilemmas and distractions won't go away, but by leading from the front with a clearly articulated vision of the future that working people want will allow us to do more than simply defeat a government.

We might actually change the current mindset in Australia of "that's just how it has to be".