

ON THE DRY SIDE 189 PARTY CONFERENCES John Hyde

The ALP Conference is nominally Labor's supreme policy making forum; so, when Labor is in office, according to Labor theory, it makes policy for the Government and the nation. Every two years Australians hang on the words of delegates who urge nostrums upon other delegates who are most unrepresentative of Australians. Ridiculous economic theories, dangerous foreign allegiances and lobbies anti this and pro that, sometimes win the support of these biennial conferences.

The affront to parliamentary democracy is not as extreme in practice as in theory, nevertheless, when Mr Hawke and Mr Keating firmly and successfully told the crazier delegates to forget their pretensions we all heaved sighs of relief and said Labor had come through the conference well. We meant that we had come through it well.

Party politics is unpopular yet no democracy functions without it. Parties are incongruous mixes of power brokers without ideals and policy zealots, and politics is the interplay of their interests. There is nothing in the nature of politics that guarantees justice but open democratic processes do help.

Objectionable in terms of democratic theory though the ALP process is, its openness is a virtue - we can see what is going on.

Political parties are more than Tammany Halls. They are guardians of ideologies and they train and select tomorrow's politicians. Therefore, in the long run, politicians come to reflect the ideology, competence and honesty of their parties. Australians depend for good government on the political parties yet few Australians bother with them. Most people who complain about the quality of politicians are too disinterested to attend political meetings which they leave to cranks and self serving power brokers whose values they do not hold and whose methods they would not countenance.

The West Australian Liberal Party, which has its conference next weekend, got the Hobart Conference off the front pages by airing its own dirty linen.

Something is rotten in the WA Liberal Party and the rot started, not in parliament, but in those ill-attended branch meetings. The source of infection was probably the ethics of the mining boom and the fear of Whitlam.

The party always has had a constitution that you could drive a horse and dray through but it did not matter so long as the people near the top honoured its spirit, and so long as the staff were honest croupiers collecting the votes and dispersing the offices. That changed in the 1970s. It is widely believed that General Secretary Lathby 'resigned' because he would not go along with the new order.

Branch presidents may sign proxies. It became common practice for staff to request signed blank proxy forms saying that 'the branch must be represented'. A hundred or more of these 'proxies' may be registered at an annual conference. When several Divisional Presidents and ex State Presidents circulated a letter urging branch presidents not to sign blank forms the incumbent State President, Mr Payne, issued an encyclical condoning the practice. A former State President recently remarked, 'Staff interference in party elections: that is not new, it happened in my day. Of course we sacked him.' In recent years there have been sackings but not on those grounds.

Membership is \$5.00; one can belong to two branches at a time, change branches as often as one pleases and vote immediately. Not surprisingly stories of branch stacking are rife.

Year after year attempts to amend the constitution have been defeated by the proxies they sought to outlaw.

The party's facilities have been used to serve factional ends within the party and funds have largely dried up.

As the party's processes became suspect, long time stalwarts deserted branches making way for power brokers, and people with axes to grind. Ideology gave place to bigotry - opponents were portrayed not just as wrong but evil. Liberality retreated and zealotry advanced. Broad minded candidates with proven track records became harder to endorse.

By 1983 the lay party had become a liability. Then, and even more so at the 1986 State election, it was out performed by a better motivated, better financed, better staffed Labor Party.

All this was brought about by destroying trust in the party's processes so that dissatisfied Liberals turned to Labor or to the many conservative splinter groups or washed their hands of politics.

At next weekend's State Conference the Liberals can put their house in order by electing a president and team who are not tainted by the past. Then they can set about cleaning up the Party's internal democracy. If they do not, their party will become increasingly irrelevant.

The West Australian Liberal Conference, even though it will have no power to direct Liberal politicians, for us in the West, will be as vital as the Hobart Labor Conference.