

# The Twilight Saga of Labor Renewal



A Discussion Paper for the April  
2013 State Conference.  
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The ALP is a bit like being caught in an endless loop of the Twilight Saga.

The days of factional "warlords" in the Party have given way to the vampires of the undead empire insisting on the Party being a world apart from mere mortals.

Like the Twilight Saga own our "Volturi" – the vampire royalty class - enforce their codes of compliance and control – sadly minus the good looks. They falsely promise eternal political life in return for our political soul. The Party's political lifeblood threatens to be drained away if we allow their whisperings to encircle our hearts and our better judgement.

The alternative is for the Party members and supporters of renewal to drive the dagger of democratic organisational change through the Volturi's heart. We know it has to be done – it's just a question of when we will take responsibility for our political party.

Libraries are filled with the need for Party Reform. Wise Elders reports, Op – Ed pieces, Think Tank workshops, Blogs and resolutions from members, State and National Conferences decisions all abound. When we look to the experience of other comparable social democratic parties we know it to be achievable and hardly earth shattering stuff.

We know the ALP must look to:

- ways to increase direct participation of existing members and to reach out to wider circles of potential members, supporters and affiliates.
- broaden out the ways members and affiliated groups can directly participate in public office selection, key Party and Political leadership elections and policy development frameworks.
- a serious organisational investment in membership development, local community leadership and campaigning skills whilst, engaging a wider spectrum of Labor supporters in these efforts.
- combining both centralised well-funded campaigning with localised community engagement techniques and fund raising efforts.

The goal needs to be a democratic, resilient Party capable of delivering when in government on the challenges of building an economy and society that both creates wealth and redistributes the benefits of growth through better opportunity and improved lives for those who need it most. Economic growth as a tide that lifts us all and so funds a better society through greater invest in education, health and jobs whilst making Australia a fairer and culturally vibrant nation is the Labor social democratic challenge it has always been. To do so in a way that creates a sustainable economy and enduring infrastructure makes the task a 21 century intergenerational pact with our children's futures and raises the sense of urgency.

A Labor social democracy model for Australia is where participation and access to a decent life is determined not by where you live, or how much you earn, or where you went to school, your gender or sexual preference. A Nation of equality of rights, opportunities and fairer outcomes is the Labor goal.

Holding us back is our Party organisation. Our own soulless factional "Volturi" control a party structure and operation that is based fundamentally on reforms of 40 years ago. Applied today they have provided the mechanism for close knit control that is counter to the Party's goals. Whilst supporting Labor's renewal "in principal" the factional Volturi will always find reasons to obstruct change.



We know the arguments. The timing is “not quite right”, the political “risks” too great, and the “uncertainties” of balancing strong leadership with a participative culture are deemed “too risky”. Time to transition is needed. The need for one more trick like a “Captains Pick” (which despite the qualities of the “star” runs the risk of a trifecta of disenfranchising party activists, accusations of tokenism and alienating the very community it was meant to be a signal to) are the alternative to serious reform. A Party run by the factional Volturi is ultimately a Party of soulless vampires devoid of contact with the real world.

Success politically for Labor has usually gone hand in hand with party reform. Policy and organisational renewal have partnered political success. Organisational stupors, alienation of our base and long term opposition have been the alternative partners for Labor when we don't deal with changing circumstances.

Worse still we know our Conservative political opponents will use the opportunities of Government to undermine our organisational capacity. We see it already with attacks on Unions ability to affiliate and donate to Labor. It is behind moves to challenge compulsory voting and introduce Optional Preferential voting. There is nothing new in these attacks. That they are given impetus by the much publicised and unforgiveable examples of corrupt behaviour from within our movement's ranks is a tragedy for Labor. This infection of Party processes interstate gives the Conservatives the cover they need to attack Unions legitimate role in both our community and their organisational links to Labor. This only serves to magnify the crass opportunism of the Liberals parading as a commitment to “accountability” and “choice” that the anti- Labor Parties have trotted out for over a century.

Labor needs to both reaffirm and modernise its links with the organised Labor Movement. Not only did the Union movement bring our Party into being, it continues to operate as the largest, most effective and progressive community organisation in the country. A declining membership and a changing economy don't detract from that fundamental link. But they do highlight the need for change. The Party needs new ways of engaging with progressives outside of the Union movement and openness to ways to achieve the broader alliance of progressives needed to win. Seeking new affiliates, broadening out the opportunities for partnership and roles within Labor for such organisations and building that progressive alliance under the Labor banner needs to be part of renewal.

Rather than waiting for the inevitable hostile changes and crisis, Labor needs to take the initiative. We need to build an organisation of members, affiliates and supporters that is capable of overcoming Tory threats by creating that alliance of progressives on our terms.

So what we are debating when we look to the April State Conference is nothing new. Labor is always at the crossroads. If we are to be the vehicle for 21<sup>st</sup> Century social democratic progress in Australia we know change is required. Indeed change has slowly commenced. But if we are only to focus on the next cycle of elections and put off the harder decisions for another day then we face the terms of that change ultimately being dictated to us.

We owe change to those who have always looked to Labor for an active government to make their lives tolerable and decent. Those who look to Labor to be the agent of change for the big economic, social and environmental issues of the times know us to be the only Party capable of delivering Government to achieve it. Add to these Labor “Twin Pillars” of support the aging baby boomers, life stylers, and service sector / digital era workers of our changing economy then the alliance of progressives Labor needs to build is wide – and not all represented organisationally in our Party currently.

Party structures and processes need to make sure the voices and concerns of this Labor alliance are heard. Our processes need to encourage and welcome their participation – not repel them.

Party Reform is more than a debate about staying ahead of the fringes who want to use our Party for self-aggrandisement – although that in itself is not a bad reason for reform. It's more about how we build a mechanism to reach out to a changing Australia in a modern social democracy operating in a global economy.

But the factional “Volturi” lurk in the shadows. We hear their siren calls of the quick fix to get us over the next campaign, the next review. To favour them means shunning renewal and risking the twilight of endless Opposition.

It's time to build on the reforms that have already commenced.

We need to continue to democratise policy processes and public office selection. We need to stop talking to ourselves and reach out to progressives in the wider community, NGO's, non-affiliated unions, the Universities and the burgeoning digital world's presence.

As Paul Keating put it, the Labor Party is a bit like a bike. You have to keep peddling or you fall off. We cannot expect to merely roll down the hill of earlier reforms and economic growth. Our political bike demands renewed momentum.

We have even taken the first tentative steps - national president elections, New Branch forms, dynamic issues and policy groups promoting creative policies and challenging ideas.

So at the risk of expanding the ranks of the cottage industry of calls for Labor Reform, the Victorian Left can lead the changes at the April Conference.

No other Party builds the big humanising enabling and progressive policies with the ability to actually apply them in Government. Our conservative opponents are all about narrowing and straightening the vision for Australia's future. Our challenge is to make sure our organisation and structures are capable of delivering the form that allows government to be a vehicle of progress and empowerment in the 21st century.

At the moment they are not. But they can be.

So if not now – when? If not us – who?



# WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

Proposals for the 2013 April State Conference.

## 1: Party Operation and structures

- Reaffirm the organisational modernisation principals set out in the 2011 Griffin Review of the Victorian Branch as committed to by the State Conference. Specifically the democratise the structures of the party organisation whilst linking these to the most logical campaigning level , widen the franchise for public office selection and broaden community engagement by:
  - Establishing one local organisational unit of the local Party Membership linking State Electoral Boundaries, campaign and party structures into a coherent unit.
  - Requiring and assisting such organisational units to plan, allocate resources and people for community engagement, training and policy development. In so doing ensure the diversity of local communities is recognised and reflected in local leadership, activist development and campaigning.
  - Continued recognition and support for policy and campaigning groups to come together around organising links – e.g. Rainbow Labor, LEAN, Labor for Refugees, Central Policy Branch concepts etc.
  - Reform the administration, finances, use of digital and on line campaigning, training and human resource approaches of the Branch to reflect best practice in domestic and comparative international organisations.
  - Establish new levels of affiliated and supportive organisation and membership involvement beyond the “Labor supporters” idea to encourage graduated participation levels around policy input, participation, and public office pre-selection ( with a particular emphasis on non-affiliated trade unions, progressive NGOs, ideas and Think Tanks).
  - Build the “Labor Supporter” concept into the rules and operation of the party together with a sophisticated approach to establish new pathways into activism and party membership.

## 2: State Conference Reform: <sup>1</sup>

State Conference as the highest level of Victorian party operations and decision making needs reform. Conference reform should include:

- Conference preparation to be based around Agenda Committee agreed outcomes on policy focus, campaign priorities, membership development

- A role as a Clearing House and policy coordinating to be emphasised in Conference with sharper concise papers / intranet for member's delegate's access to all papers and reports.
- Policy development / research skills development opportunities to be associated with conference.
- Breakout groups / fringe programs to have clearer focus on proactive and challenging themes and consciously to take up provocateur approaches to challenge party orthodoxies.
- Return to 2 day conference with opportunities for strategy, contested debates, and office bearers and leaders to report back on previous decisions, processes, showcase achievements, successful campaigns.

### **3: Campaigning and Finances.**

Adopt the 2011 Griffin Reviews recommendations in areas of:

- the marginal seats strategy, direct campaigning (with the allowance for the current EBC review timetable), the Polling and Research changes and preference negotiations, Parliamentary Party and State Branch relationship recommendations.
- the ALP Finances and Fund raising Recommendations as a priority.

### **4: Public Office Pre Selection.**

- All eligible Party Members directly vote for their preferred endorsed candidate in the preselection of both their local lower and Upper house / Senate Candidates (in the latter case by postal / secure on line voting) to make up the current 50% of the final preselection panel.
- For lower house seats the other 50% of the votes to come from a ballot combining the local affiliated Trade Union Members in the seat joined with the weighted ballot of Unions state Conference delegates. Upper house seats to be via the central panel joined with Party member's votes.

### **5: Leadership. Parliamentary and Organisational.**

- Adopt a variation on the British (and other parties) system of Party members and MPs voting for the Parliamentary leadership ticket of Leader and Deputy with the Parliamentary Party weighted to 60% and Party Members and the votes of affiliated Trade Unions being weighted to the other 40%.
- Adopt a direct proportional vote for the State Branch President by Branch Members with Deputy President being those who finish 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> in a ballot of members and affiliated organisations. Rotation of those Office holders across the term into President role.
- The Branch Secretary position and two Assistant Branch Secretaries to be voted in by a proportional representation ballot system of Members and Affiliated organisations.

### **6: Party Positions and New Structures.**

- Major Committees such as Administrative committees, Policy Development / platform coordination committees to be elected by Branch membership and affiliated organisations on a PR basis.
- Dedicated long term budget, officers and programs to fund activist and branch member training and development in community engagement and party campaigning.
- Policy Facilitation Development units to work with non-Party organisations to build the progressive Labor policy networks for Platform and ideas purposes.

**7: Platform endorsement.**

- Provide for Policy Platform to be endorsed by Branch Conference and then a ballot of Branch Members and Affiliated organisations prior to its development as an election policy.

**8: Reaffirm Supremacy of Caucus within the Parliamentary Party.**

- Confirm the current rules of election of Parliamentary Front bench positions to be by the Parliamentary caucus and re-affirm the principal of parliamentary leadership being the “first amongst equals”. This would enshrine the democratic “dynamic tension’ in the relationship between the caucus and the Parliamentary leadership. (Admittedly the alternative of Leadership appointment of front benchers is a recent Federal practice which has yet to infect the operation of State caucus. The practice should be done away with and the rules enshrined.)