

KEVIN RUDD'S PLANS DON'T COME CLOSE TO A BLAIRITE AGENDA
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Tony Blair modernised the British Labour Party by sticking with Thatcherite reforms, whereas the ALP leadership is still taking orders from unions

In the lead-up to this week's ALP national conference, there has been speculation that Kevin Rudd may "do a Blair". But if you consider how Tony Blair modernised the British Labour Party and its relations with trade unions, it becomes very clear that Rudd's agenda is hardly Blairite.

Blair's speech to the British Trades Union Congress in September 1997 was the defining moment in the modernisation of the British Labour Party. Blair told his audience to "build unions that people join not just out of fear of change or exploitation but because they are committed to success, unions that look forwards not backwards and that support workers and foster the true adaptability they need to be secure in (this) competitive and fast changing world".

In contrast, the campaign being run by Australian unions and supported by Rudd is based on the opposite ethos: creating as much fear of change as possible and telling workers that they are completely helpless. It is a campaign in which adaptability and flexibility are dirty words.

Blair went on to tell his union audience: "Let us not make people think trades unions are someone you have to be forced to talk to. By your actions, let us make it impossible to dismiss trades unions as old-fashioned, defensive, anti-progress and activist dominated."

The ACTU's present policy agenda would force every management to talk to a union. Employers could be forced into union agreements even if they employed only one union member. This is one union policy that Rudd has conspicuously not renounced. Most significantly, Blair pledged not to roll back Margaret Thatcher's industrial relations reforms: a policy that has left Britain with an IR system that is still less regulated than Australia's: "We will keep the flexibility of the present labour market, and it may make some shiver, but in the end it is warmer in the real world." The ALP's existing policy would roll back not only the Coalition's reforms of 1996 and 2005, even elements of the Keating government's 1993 reforms would be reversed.

The ALP IR platform that Rudd has inherited is essentially unchanged from the one adopted at the party's 2000 conference. That conference, in response to union pressure, rolled back key elements of the party's 1998 election policy that would have allowed for Australian Workplace Agreements. At the time, Kim Beazley was criticised for rolling over to the unions, and no Labor leader since then has given any indication of modifying this platform.

Blair knew that modernising the internal structures of the British Labour Party was a prerequisite for winning office. Rather than taking instructions from the unions, he

goaded them into action: "Modernise your political structures as we have in the Labour Party. The old ways of the Labour Party were the resolutionists, the committee rooms, the fixing and the small groups trying to run the show. That has no future." Reforms introduced in 1994 allowed all members of the British Labour Party to vote directly for their representatives on the party's national executive, in place of the vote being dominated by unelected blocks of stooges controlled by union leaders.

The ALP is not even close to this. When Simon Crean proposed reducing the union block vote from 60 per cent to 50 per cent, he was eaten alive. Beazley's inability to address the ALP's backroom culture of domination by unions and factions led to perceptions of political weakness that he was never able to shake off. Now Rudd seems set to follow the Beazley path, proposing no changes in a party structure widely regarded as corrupted and undemocratic. This is a distinctly un-Blairite approach.

It is therefore hard to imagine Rudd being able to tell an ALP conference what Blair told the TUC: "The country actually knows that influence with this Government and with me is not determined by anything other than the persuasiveness of your argument. That is the right way and it is the truth."

At a time when union membership in the private-sector work force is barely 15 per cent, unions have more influence in the ALP than ever. In addition to their internal party control, unions have donated more than \$60million to the ALP since the Coalition won office and are likely to exceed this amount in their attempts to influence the 2007 election.

So if Rudd wishes to "do a Blair", it will entail much more than mouthing platitudes about being modern and pretending to stand up to the unions by chastening Doug Cameron and then rewarding him with a safe Senate seat. In Blair's case it required years of hard work and genuine political courage to modernise Old Labour, risking an enormous backlash from the unions and reactionaries in his party. In the end he won out and created a party far more modern, democratic and independent than the one that will be on show at the ALP national conference.

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