

Speech by Senator John Faulkner at the Glebe Town Hall
on 10 June 2004 to launch *Local Labor*

Local Labor. A History of the Labor Party in Glebe 1891-2003, by Michael Hogan,
published by The Federation Press.

As Tip O'Neill so famously said, all politics is local.

And the Australian Labor Party is no different from any other political party in that respect.

Our local branches have their ebb and flow in membership, and in community connection, but on the whole they bring the values of their local community to bear on the politics of our state and our nation. They localise those politics.

At the same time, they spread Labor values through the suburbs and towns where they meet, where their members live.

They politicise their locality.

If all politics are local, then in the Australian Labor Party, all localities are political.

Michael Hogan tells the story of one such political locality, the story of Labor in Glebe. He starts with the birth of Labor as a political force in 1891 and goes on through:

- branch-stacking,
- logrolling,
- the exploitation of local sentiment by factional leaders,
- electoral rorting,
- fisticuffs at Annual General Meetings,
- a disputed ballot,
- accusations that the Party has no real roots in the community and that Party members are bourgeoisie blow-ins,
- a split,
- and branch secretaries legging it into the night clutching the books.

It was with a certain degree of trepidation that I turned to Chapter Two to find out what happened in Glebe Labor's second year of existence!

When it came to sharp practices, Labor hit the ground running. When it came to recruitment, however, progress was slower - at least in Glebe. The struggle by small numbers of committed activists to maintain branch numbers, the repeated missionary activities of Head Office and the occasional disappearance of a branch have a remarkably modern flavour for a story of Labor's early days.

Indeed, I could barely turn a page of *Local Labor* without coming across a familiar scene. Page twenty six - the union movement and the parliamentary wing struggle for control of the Party. Not 2002, 1892. At page thirty one, I read of the 1894 state preselection having to be held twice due to "alleged irregularities in the [first] ballot". At page fifty, complaints by the non-Labor candidate that gangs of young larrikins were pulling down and defacing his campaign posters; on the next page, Labor Party officials accused of witnessing false electoral enrolments; and on page fifty nine a Labor alderman running as 'independent Labor' to protest the imposition of candidates by Head Office. All of this before Labor's twentieth birthday in 1911!

Glebe Branch - or Labor League as Branches were then called - celebrated that 20th anniversary by threatening Head Office with legal action after the State Executive declared the Branch defunct. By this point, sixty pages in, I was beginning to realise that for those of us with a history in the labour movement the message of Michael's book might very well be that the more things change, the more they really do stay the same. A message reinforced as I read on to the familiar story of the rightwing machine complaining about students and academics from Sydney University moving into Glebe and taking over the branches. A familiar story, except it happened in the 1930s, forty years before precisely the same kind of complaints would be made about the student radicals of my generation.

And in 1956, Head Office responded to complaints about stacking in Toxteth Branch by disqualifying 54 members from voting - purely coincidentally, of course, most of those excluded were opponents of the Head Office candidate. Duly preselected, that candidate justified the faith of Head Office. He went on to become a founding member of the DLP.

So, much of this book tells a familiar story. And what is most familiar to me is that politics is played hard in the ALP. Sometimes the contest is between two local party bosses struggling for control of the municipal council and the patronage and other opportunities that came with it. Opportunities like the one that gave Doc Foley his nickname 'Steamroller', when he sold the Council's steamroller as scrap to one of his mates for £10. Mayor Foley then insisted that the council engineer hire a steamroller for roadwork from that same mate. A steamroller that the engineer would tell a later Parliamentary Inquiry he found very familiar, despite a suspicious brand new paint job.

I, of course, like Doc Foley because he devised a magnificent tactic of dealing with the unfortunate situation of being two votes short of a majority at the Annual General Meeting of the King SEC. One of his branch delegates suffered a massive heart attack just as the returning officer took the chair and called for nominations. Amazingly, the delegate made a miraculous and complete recovery after most of Foley's opponents had left the meeting. 'Doc' Foley's ticket won every position.

'Doc' Foley was anxious to bolster the strength of his local machine and keep control of the Council. But, as *Local Labor* shows, the clash of personal ambitions isn't the only cause of conflict in the branches. There are also differing views of the stand the Party ought to take on state, national, and international matters. To outsiders these issues seem unrelated to local concerns of drainage and closing hours. From this perspective, policy debates are the impositions by distant factional warlords of agendas foreign to the rank-and-file.

This image of the ALP is very prevalent outside the Party. Our author, Michael Hogan, though a good friend of the labour movement, is not a Party member. That lends his work a valuable distance.

But we know it does not take the prompting of the factions for our branches to hold equally informed and equally passionate views about privatisation or about speed-humps. After all, Medicare, public hospitals, and the local council's community immunisation program may each be the responsibility of a different tier of government, but all are crucial to delivering better health for workers and their families.

Gough Whitlam, Labor's most internationalist Prime Minister, is very proud of Neville Wran's remark, that Whitlam found the western suburbs of Sydney unsewered and left them fully flushed. Gough placed equal importance on the need for better local facilities and for stronger foreign policies. His interests were not as atypical as his talents were exceptional.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the amount of work that Michael Hogan has done to bring the details of Labor in Glebe to the general reader is extraordinary. I think the only thing more exhausting than reading a hundred years worth of branch meeting minutes would be sitting through a hundred years worth of branch meetings.

This is really ground-breaking scholarship. As far as I'm aware, no-one else in Australia has compiled this kind of record of the local organisation of a political Party for over more than a century of continuous existence.

Of course, since Labor is the only Australian political party with such longevity, a feat of political scholarship of this magnitude is only possible when the subject is a Labor branch.

But it's not only that Michael has assembled a mass of information. He's certainly collected plenty of the tiny details that mean so much in a portrait of any organisation - things like whether branch members owned their own homes or rented, or the length of time a meeting went on before the discussion turned to the admission of new members (sometimes not until the prospective new members had left!).

Or this particularly telling extract from the 1920 *Labor News*:

“Ten ways to kill a Labor League:

1. Don't come to the meetings.
2. If you come, come late.
3. If the weather doesn't suit you, don't think of coming.
4. If you attend a meeting, find fault with the work of the officers and other members.
5. Never accept an office, as it is easier to criticise than do things.
6. Nevertheless, get sore if you are not appointed on a committee, but if you are, do not attend the committee meetings.
7. If asked by the chairman to give your opinion regarding some important matter, tell him you have nothing to say. After the meeting, tell everyone how things ought to be done.
8. Do nothing more than is absolutely necessary, but when other members roll up their sleeves and willingly, unselfishly use their ability to help matters along, howl that the League is run by a clique.
9. Hold back your subscription as long as possible, or don't pay at all.
10. Don't bother about getting new members. Let the secretary do it.”

On a personal note, I was delighted to see, in 1918, the appearance of the first incarnation of Forest Lodge Branch. Of course, I was a member of Forest Lodge Branch from 1983 until the branch name was changed to Blackwattle. I well remember that evening at the Glebe Police Boys Club, as I handed over my clearance card to transfer my Party membership and the welcoming words of the Branch President: "Oh, shit, not you!"

Of course I did fare better than many others trying to join the Labor Party in the electorate of Elizabeth. The local member, former State Parliamentary Leader and clever local operator to boot, Pat Hills informed a number of prospective new members that he appreciated their interest but he was sorry they couldn't join - because the local branches were all full. Incredibly, they believed him.

And I was surprised to read the familiar story of a Mr Gould in trouble with the Party - this time, the secretary of Glebe Branch between 1928 and 1933, Stephen Gould, father of the Bob Gould we know so well from inner-city Sydney politics. Would you believe Stephen Gould

found himself on the wrong side of the great Glebe Branch Revolt of 1932 for being insufficiently left-wing?

Having searched through a huge amount, an absolute mountain, of details and minutiae and facts, Michael has, equally importantly, resisted the temptation to inflict it all on the reader. This book, with its racy narrative and its well-chosen examples, makes branch meetings seem interesting. That is quite a feat, as any ALP member will tell you!

Over a hundred and ten years and 217 pages, Michael has given us a complete and completely compelling story of the Labor Party's life in one community, in Glebe. And what it most convincingly shows is that neither Labor's strengths nor Labor's flaws are as recent in origin as we often think.

Michael Hogan tells us that there never really was a 'Golden Age' for the Glebe ALP. There have always been local leaders and many members from the middle classes. Michael tells us in the early days of Glebe Labor the interests of the branches and their members were secondary to electoral success. We read that our local branches have never been truly representative or purely democratic, and were always ineffectual when it comes to changing policy. *Local Labor* shows in detail that factions and ambitions are ever-present in Labor politics.

You see, as Michael shows us, the Labor Party will never be what others would like it to be. For a hundred years we've been hearing what the 'real' Labor Party should look like, what the 'real' Labor Party should be.

To our friendly and unfriendly critics, the 'real' Labor Party is somewhere else: humble, purely proletarian, solely concerned with the survival of the local worker's club and extra housing for the poor.

But, as Michael's book so convincingly shows, that 'real' Labor Party is a fantasy.

Labor has never been, and will never be, what others want us to be. We are as we are.

The great strength of this book is that it shows us as we are, and always have been: quarrelling with our comrades even as we stand shoulder-to-shoulder with them; sometimes dedicated and sometimes apathetic; sometimes united and sometimes most bitterly divided. But always there. Always there.

Was there a 'Golden Age' of Glebe Labor? You bet. The last hundred and thirteen years.

And we thank Michael Hogan for bringing that story to life in *Local Labor*.
