

Document 7



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At what point did Labor drift towards a sort of corporatist dystopia? I went searching for the origins of the democratic malaise in the Australian Labor Party some years ago. I wanted to find at what point in time branches became unimportant to the leaders of the party. I wanted to pinpoint the time when party officials became the dominant force in appointing candidates for representative office in State and Federal parliaments. I was looking for a time when the party became about the interests of parliamentary representatives and party officials themselves. I wanted to know when the party philosophy became a dull mantra of another time and place recited by scoundrels for their own self interest. Cynical individuals might say it was always thus. But this does not seem to be so. No matter what the sins of the past in terms of racism (White Australia Policy) or secretarian politics, the party had a large membership and local branches were all important in setting policy and electing individuals to office. Even with tightly controlled and disciplined State political machines the importance of the individual branch member exercising his or her judgement to elect a parliamentary or trade union representative seemed to be sacrosanct. Moreover there is no question that the views and aspirations of ordinary people were reflected in their Labor representatives.

At some point the rationality of Labor representatives and their constituency diverged. To plot such a moment in time you must depart from the commissioned party research, the glorious party biographies and congratulatory official history. You must turn away from the self serving party historians, speech writers and former officials

and politicians. It is necessary to rustle through files and pamphlets that have been forgotten. It is necessary to look with a different eye at the figures who never sought the limelight and who were often dumped unceremoniously by the Party machine at strategic conjunctures. It is necessary to think with the perspective of an ordinary “outsider” not an “insider”. You have to shun leaders or powerbrokers or the victors of history within the party as just empty doctrine.

Armed with this mind set I found “Document 7” in the archived papers of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) Federal Secretariat (MS 4985 National Library of Australia). It led me to Cyril S. Wyndham – the first full time Secretary of the Federal Australian Labor Party in Canberra. Who was he? As time has gone by I have come to think of Wyndham as the unsung hero of democracy within the Australian Labor Party. A man whose instincts were for the common good, who worked for a very small salary and who never expected anything for his service to the party. It seems to me that when people of good will like Wyndham are deserted by the party then this marks a time when the party starts to go off the rails. Against the Chifleys, Evatts, Whitlams, Hawkes - his more famous and illustrious colleagues would remember him as only a minor figure. Moreover Wyndham’s finest hours were before Labor’s triumphant “Its Time” election of 1972. In fact the “It’s Time” campaign and the new kind of politics and political personalities that emerged around this period might well have been the reason for the demise of people like Wyndham within the party.

Despite occupying high office you have to search hard to find Wyndham’s name anywhere in the party annals. I doubt whether his two Labor representatives Robert Coombs and Greg Combet would even know who he was, let alone that he lived within their electorates. Yet Wyndham holds much Labor knowledge. I suspect that, as is often the case, some of his colleagues discouraged researchers from contacting him. He knew all of the major, revered figures of the party of the late 1950s and 1960s, yet remained steadfastly loyal and circumspect. After leaving the national office of the party he simply chose to retire, away from the limelight with his beloved wife Nola – a great and humble man. To have any future, Labor needs to recall more great and humble men like Cyril Wyndham .

Why was Wyndham so important? His Document 7 was a plan to completely re-organise the Labor Party from top to bottom. He was the first party official to push for direct representation of party members in ALP Federal and, by implication, State conferences. He, with the Labor historian and Chifley biographer, L.F. “Fin” Crisp, recognised that Labor needed to move towards a model of social democracy and to move beyond the Laborist/workerist model of Labor politics. I suspect that much of Wyndham’s thinking emerged from his discussions with the much maligned Doc Evatt and the fact that he came from the innately more democratic British Labor Party. When lights like Wyndham and Crisp started to go out within the party, the party started to decline.

Wyndham had worked within the British Labor Party from an early age. He rose to become special assistant to Morgan Phillips, the General Secretary of the British Labor Party, as such Wyndham had seen and worked in a structure that was far more democratic and far more centralised than the disjointed State branches of the Australian Labor Party. Wyndham had met the Australian representatives Joe Chamberlain, Jack Schmella and Doc Evatt at a meeting of Commonwealth Labor

representatives in London in 1957, he was invited to join Evatt's staff, met his wife Nola and decided to stay in Australia.

Document 7 does not look much in this age of manicured pamphlets, media presentations and power point slides but it was a comprehensive plan for re-organising the Labor Party. It was presented to the Federal Executive in 1966. It is important to note that Wyndham had witnessed, as a member of the leader's staff, the trauma of Evatt's narrow defeat at the 1958 election and Calwell's even narrower loss in 1961. He had taken up the Secretary's role of the Victorian Labor Party and had to manage the strife of interests which lost Labor election after election in Victoria and nationally. He had only reluctantly taken the position of the first full time national secretary in Canberra in 1963. In March 1963 Wyndham had witnessed how Alan Reid's famous snap of Calwell and Whitlam waiting outside for the 36 faceless men of the ALP executive to apparently tell them, as parliamentary leaders, what to do had led to a Menzies land slide.

The significance of Document 7¹ - "The Recommendations of the General Secretary" on "Party Re-organisation" - is that, amongst all of this tumult, Wyndham had the foresight to see that direct representation of party members was central to the future health of the Labor Party. Unfortunately, his colleagues didn't see this at all. In 1965 Gough Whitlam told the party faithful "Mr Wyndham symbolises the fact that the Labor Party is now becoming a national party instead of a collection of six state parties. Since the last conference he has been appointed as the Party's first full-time Federal Secretary. The wisdom of his appointment is shown by the promptness and accuracy of the minutes and reports which delegates have received. His proposals for Federal reorganisation of the Party would give the rank and file of the party and its affiliates the same degree of participation in Federal decisions and organisation as they already have in State decisions and organisation. They would give Parliamentarians the same direct participation in the affairs of the Australian Labor Party as they have in all other socialist parties. I have attended as many Labor Party organisations as any delegate here; I have found uniform and strong support for the Wyndham proposals because they will make it possible for our party to pursue organisationally the principles we pursue politically. Our platform urges that Australia be organised on a national not on a state basis; our rules provide for our party to be organised on a state basis."² However only the Executive of the time would have known just how far Wyndham had called on the party to reform itself. Rank and file party members would have to wait over forty years for internal party democracy to catch up with him. In many ways the party still has not caught up with him or his ideas. Three years after Document 7 was tabled Wyndham himself was treated very badly by the party machine and left the position of General Secretary to which he brought a unique and refreshing perspective. He was a man far ahead of his time.

One of the questions you ask yourself is why was direct representation not taken up and why was Wyndham himself dropped so unceremoniously by the powers that be within the party? Wyndham and his friend "Fin" Crisp were themselves very pessimistic about the chances of direct representation. They would have had to taken on all of the State machines at once. In 1966 the entire Federal conference of the

¹ See Attachment 1 Papers of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) Federal Secretariat (MS 4985 National Library of Australia)

² Address by Mr E.G. Whitlam to ALP National Conference, 4 August 1965

Australian Labor Party was made up of only a small number of representatives of the State machines. Crisp knew that it would be political suicide for Wyndham to press too hard against the centralised State blocs. He advised Wyndham simply to raise the idea of direct representation. However Wyndham and Crisp wanted each party member and Labor aligned trade union members and not the State machines to directly elect their representatives and so we find Wyndham simply recommending an investigative report to examine the feasibility of direct representation. He hoped that having raised the idea that the pressure would come from below. But Wyndham and Crisp underestimated the ability of the party machine to squash any possibility of democratic change. I believe that one of the reasons why Wyndham was viewed with suspicion was that even suggesting an inquiry was enough for the party's powerbrokers to view him as trespassing into the the protected domain of the individual State machines.

In the years leading up to Whitlam's famous electoral win of 1972 it also seemed that there was a steadfast determination to win and not to unbalance the party machines. As such many of Wyndham's internal goals were not considered important. In a pattern that was to repeat itself over and over again party democracy was overlooked or was too hard and the main game was about getting attractive candidates into the party and viable policies into the press. Not that Wyndham was any slouch hand in policy and development of candidates. It was his idea to put Gough Whitlam's photo on the amended party rules of 1967³. But he noted in an interview: Mick Young, his predecessor as Federal Secretary, did not want the job. It was just a temporary position until he entered parliament. This was the start of the rot which has been much observed over the past decade especially in the State branches of the party.⁴ The General Secretary of the Labor Party – either at State or Federal level - became very much a position that one occupied on the way to a parliamentary position. As Mills has noted 54 per cent of 80 State Labor secretaries went on to attain parliamentary seats and since Wyndham's tenure nearly 40 per cent of Federal secretaries have gone on to attain a Federal seat⁵. Federal secretaries and party officials arguably were not interested in party democracy but more interested in winning elections and pre-selection opportunities. The agenda that Wyndham had identified so early was lost for decades. Party members would have to wait until the 1980s before party democracy would again be taken up.

Wyndham believed that party officials should not use their positions to gain a seat in parliament. Their job of party official was to strengthen the capacity of the party. The General Secretary was someone who was responsible for the administration of the party including its internal democracy. In 1966 Wyndham and his close friend Fin Crisp dreamed of direct representation of Federal conference by Federal Electorates and Federal Trade Unions. The irony is if they had achieved their dream the Labor Party would be a stronger, organic and developing force instead of the moribund, inward group of self serving officials and representatives we see today.

³ See Attachment 2 "The Rules and Standing Orders of the Federal Conference of the Australian Labor Party, As amended by the 1967 Commonwealth Conference – Adelaide" Papers of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) Federal Secretariat (MS 4985 National Library of Australia)

⁴ See on this Stephen Mills, "Contrasting Paths: Political Careers of Labor and Liberal State Party Officials", University of Sydney, Australian Political Studies Association, 2010

⁵ Ibid., p. 4

Many of Wyndham's recommendations in Document 7 were a long way ahead of the Party – some have never been implemented. His recommendation that the leader and deputy leader of the Federal Parliamentary Party and the Leader and Deputy Leader of the Federal Parliamentary Party in the Senate was accepted and became part of the party rules in 1967. This was inevitable after the faceless men debacle. Similarly it became the norm for the shadow cabinet of the Federal Party to attend Federal conference but with no voting rights. Wyndham's recommendation that State leaders should attend Federal conference with full voting rights was ignored but later taken up. In fact Gough Whitlam made much of this at the 1967 Federal Conference. Wyndham's recommendation that the President and Secretary of the Federal Labor Women's Organising Committee be given full voting rights at conference was also ignored but again later women's participation within Federal conference has been boosted. His call for an annual federal conference has never been implemented primarily because of the enduring dominance of State machines. Federal Conference now meets every three years. Wyndham's view that trade unions be given the right to set three items at Federal conference was also a first which was again later taken up. His call for the Federal Executive to be expanded to three representatives of each State machine was ignored but once again later taken up. The current size of the Executive is 25. Wyndham's call for an honorary Treasurer was also heeded as was his call for a platform review committee which he had called originally "a high policy committee". His recommendations on party discipline were implemented as were his recommendations on the relationship between the Executive and the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party. Wyndham recommended the establishment of a Federal Labor Women's Organisation and a Youth Organisation all of which were later implemented. His recommendations for the recruitment of party members was largely up to the State party machines. His recommendations on Federal electoral organisation were also taken up as were his recommendations to encourage trade unions to affiliate with the Labor Party. His views on international links with other Labor organisations were also well ahead of their time and were only patchily taken up.

The significance of Document 7 is that it was the first call for real party democracy. Wyndham called for direct representation of party members and an expansion of State representation. The neglect and failure to take up Wyndham's call for direct representation of Labor members for many years was like a canary in a mine shaft. It was the beginning of Labor's long term malaise and is an indicator of the contemporary inability of the Labor party to grow and develop.

Books and Pamphlets by Cyril S. Wyndham

Cyril S. Wyndham , *Informal vote in all electorates and all states for both Senate and House of Representatives elections since 1955* , Canberra

Cyril S. Wyndham *The National Civic Council : a closer look* . Canberra : C.S. Wyndham, 1965, 16 p. ; 22 cm.

Cyril S. Wyndham, *Democratic socialism today / a paper by Cyril S. Wyndham to the Young Labor Association, Noosa Heads, Queensland, December 5, 1965* [Sydney] : New South Wales Branch, Australian Labor Party, 1966

Cyril S. Wyndham, *The unbridgable gulf-- between democratic socialism and communism* Canberra, A.C.T. : Australian Labor Party Federal Secretariat, 1964

Cyril S. Wyndham, *Percentage of formal primary votes received by respective parties for Australia and for each state, 1946-1966 : table 3 (revised)* Canberra : Australian Labor Party, [1966?] . 13 leaves ; 26 cm

Cyril S. Wyndham, *Senate election 25 November, 1967, Australian Labor Party Senate teams : biographies of candidates*, Australian Labor Party, Canberra, 1967
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