

Labour and Labor: a tale of two identity crises

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The Labour party's troubles are not news to its Australian counter-part, writes [Keshia Jacotine](#). Instead, both parties have struggled to strike a balance between identifying themselves as representatives of a large cross-section of voters and keeping a united and strong parliamentary front.



Labour is facing its second leadership contest in twelve months, and some have [even speculated](#) that the party is fractured beyond repair in the aftermath of Brexit. Labour is in the throws of an identity crisis; this contest can be seen as a battle for the heart and soul of the party between its divisive leader Jeremy Corbyn and his far-left support base, and sole challenger Owen Smith, who has [the support](#) of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP). It is quite possible we are witnessing a major political self-destruct right in front of our eyes, however, Australian observers may feel a sense of déjà vu.

The Australian Labor Party (ALP) has struggled through its own identity crisis which has seen two sitting Prime Ministers ousted by their own MPs. There are more than a few parallels between the two crises; [both parties](#) were born out of the disenfranchisement of the working class who felt ignored by the political establishment and were joined by trade unions. The parties shared a similar trajectory over the 20th century; by 2000, it was clear that Labour/Labor had diverged from their origins in order to capture a broader support basis.

The story of the modern ALP is similar to the story of Labour's transformation into New Labour; both parties moved away from their origins as self-identifying socialist parties towards the centre of their respective political systems with a shift towards market economics. Labour's transformation into New Labour occurred under the governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, while the ALP underwent its transformation under three prime ministers; Gough Whitlam, Bob Hawke and Paul Keating.

[red-shades](#)

Whitlam is [widely viewed](#) as the ALP's great moderniser who changed the Party's organisation and ideas. Some of the Whitlam Government's policies included the introduction of universal health care, social welfare reform and the reduction of tariffs by 25 per cent – which in turn opened the Australian economy to the rest of the world. Whitlam was ousted during [the 1975 Constitutional Crisis](#), but his party successors Hawke and Keating continued this program of reform and modernisation.

This included a greater move towards regulation of Australia's financial sector, further removal of tariffs and floating the Australian Dollar. These reforms signaled a further move away from Labor's previous preference for Keynesian economic policies, and one toward the increasingly dominant Anglo-American model of Neoliberalism. Keating was defeated by the Liberal Party's John Howard, who would go onto become Australia's second longest running Prime Minister from 1996 until 2007.

It was believed that part of Howard's success was that he was able to build a support base comprised of traditional ALP aspirational working class voters, nicknamed the "Howard Battlers". Research [conducted into](#) whether or not this was actually the case, found the myth of the Howard Battler to be just that: it had no electoral basis to it and several key seats that were believed to be "taken" from the ALP actually had been held by the Coalition even while they were in Opposition.

The myth raised questions about the identity of a Labor voter and in turn, the identity of the party as a whole. These questions have continued through into the ALP governments of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard from 2007 to 2013 and into the 2016 election. Aside from the Liberals, the ALP has faced competition from the Australian Greens for its

more progressive, left-leaning voters. The ALP's stances on issues such as [the mandatory detention of refugees](#) were widely criticised as moving closer and closer to the social conservatism of the Coalition, something which the Greens campaigned heavily against. In this most recent election, [the Greens](#) and [ALP](#) swapped accusations of colluding with the Coalition for a vote preference that would lock out the other party out.

There is also a threat from the far right of both British and Australian politics. Labour now faces [a major challenge](#) from UKIP for its socially conservative voters and in Australia, the [reemergence](#) of Pauline Hanson and her anti-immigration party, One Nation, in the Senate suggests the Australian political system is not immune to the most recent wave of right wing populism sweeping through other countries in Europe and North America.

But perhaps Labour's biggest threat is itself; the party's infighting over Corbyn's leadership has created deep rifts that may take years, or even decades, to resolve. Something that can be learned from their Australian counterparts is these rifts can be devastating to the party's survival; Rudd and Gillard both led coups against the other while they were Prime Minister. Leadership contests involving sitting Prime Ministers are nothing new to either parties; there was the infamous Brown and Blair rivalry in Labour and in the ALP it was Hawke with his Treasurer and Deputy Keating.

What made Rudd and Gillard more unique and perhaps more savage, was the fact that the ALP's parliamentary wing replaced its leader twice over a period of five years. Rudd was ousted by Gillard [in 2010](#), and [in 2013](#) in the run up to the Federal Election, Rudd replaced Gillard as ALP leader and Prime Minister. The cost of this internal struggle was [the 2013 Federal Election](#) to Tony Abbott and the Coalition; the ALP was perceived by some voters as being unstable and untrustworthy, which delivered a swift and sizable victory to Abbott.

Corbyn and Momentum are an entirely different problem, but there are clear parallels in the struggles of the ALP and Labour to identify themselves as a party that can capture such a large cross-section of voters while trying to present a united parliamentary front. For many years the strength of both parties has been that they were broad churches for voters, but as the British and Australian political systems continue to evolve, this could now be both parties' greatest weakness.

About the Author

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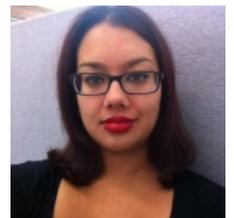


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